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(Plus Scouting Reports for Every Team)

NFL PREVIEW 2018
AUGUST 27–SEPTEMBER 3, 2018
DOUBLE ISSUE
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Sports Illustrated

WELCOME BACK, FOOTBALL!

DESHAUN WATSON

AND . . .

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THE (INJURED) STARS ALIGN
After missing the final nine games of 2017, the Texans' QB is ready to pick up where he left off—as the NFL's next great passer.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRYCE WOOD

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AUGUST 27–SEPTEMBER 3, 2018 | VOLUME 129 | NO. 5

GUESS WHO'S BACK

Story of the season: Some of the NFL's biggest stars are returning after long injury layoffs—including a certain Giants wide receiver.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

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NOW ON

SI DIGITAL

The MMQB NFL Podcast

THE MMQB'S suite of podcasts brings you unique, informed and immediate analysis from around the NFL. Whether you're looking to catch up on Sunday's action, take a deep dive into game film or find the answer to a burning question, The MMQB staff—the rotating cast of hosts includes Albert Breer, Jenny Vrentas and Andy Benoit—has you covered. Among the topics discussed in the first week: Aaron Rodgers's legacy and the state of the Packers' offense. Subscribe at Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Stitcher or visit on.si.com/MMQBpod to listen.

- **MONDAY** The Monday Morning NFL Podcast
- **WEDNESDAY** The MMQB Podcast with Albert Breer
- **THURSDAY** The NFL Deep Dive Podcast
- **FRIDAY** The MMQB Gambling Show

MOUTHING OFF

In the latest installment of *The Big Interview,* outspoken Florida Atlantic coach Lane Kiffin explains why he loves trash talk and the Owls' chances of repeating as C-USA champs.

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FIT TO BE TIED
An hour after beating Okker 14-12, 5–7, 6–3, 3–6, 6–3, Ashe was back on court in a doubles semifinal (right).

LEADING OFF

OPEN MIND

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN

BEGINNING ON the afternoon of Sept. 9, 1968, renowned photographer John G. Zimmerman chronicled 36 hours that changed tennis. At 5:40 p.m., Arthur Ashe, an instructor of computer programming at West Point, beat Tom Okker of the Netherlands in five sets to win the U.S. Open at Forest Hills. With the victory, Ashe became the first black man to win a Grand Slam tournament. In an interview afterward, the 25-year-old Ashe, the son of a Richmond policeman, was asked about the racial conflicts of the time and said, "Everybody is conscious of black power, white power, purple power, whatever you say. I am black, so I'm sorta caught up in black power, I guess. The question is, 'which road do I take?' Well, I'm definitely not conservative, and definitely not moderate in these matters. I guess I'm a militant, but there are varying degrees of militancy—from outright killing to brinkmanship. I guess I'm somewhere in between."

The 1968 Open was also the first in which both professionals and amateurs competed, and Ashe, an amateur, won expenses (about $20 per day), while Okker took home $14,000. An hour after the singles final, Ashe returned to the court with partner Andrés Gimeno for a doubles semifinal against Clark Graebner and Charlie Pasarell. At 12–12 in the fourth set, the match was postponed due to darkness. The following day, Ashe and Gimeno triumphed only to lose in the final a few hours later. Ashe had played 162 games in less than 24 hours. He then flew to Las Vegas with the Davis Cup team for an exhibition. Zimmerman, on assignment for LIFE, went along. His photos are being shown for the first time in a new book, *Crossing the Line: Arthur Ashe at the 1968 US Open*, published by Hannibal in cooperation with the John G. Zimmerman Archive. They capture not just a sport in transition, but a man as well. Ashe would evolve from an athlete who could go unrecognized on the subway to a prominent civil rights advocate before his death in 1993. Zimmerman's photographs are a rare look at a star being born.

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NOTABLE AND UNNOTICED

On the day of the singles final, Ashe shared the spotlight at the awards ceremony in Forest Hills with his father, Arthur Sr. (1); fielded questions from reporters (2); and dressed casually for a call in the locker room (3). The next day he took the subway to the postponed doubles final (4).

LAS VEGAS ATTRACTION

In the desert, Ashe played roulette at the Desert Inn (1); posed with (left to right) Davis Cup captain Donald Dell and teammates Clark Graebner and Ron Holmberg at the Stardust (2); and was introduced to the audience by Harry Belafonte at Caesars Palace (3). Ashe and Belafonte later founded Artists and Athletes Against Apartheid.

1

2

3

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INBOX FOR AUGUST 13, 2018

MONSTER STATEMENT
Your article on **J.D. Martinez** made for enjoyable reading, but let's give credit where credit is due. Much of the "new approach" to hitting is just a legacy of Ted Williams and *The Science of Hitting*. What we've learned about batting with all our technology was intuitively learned by Mr. Williams (the Einstein of hitting).
Keith Krueger
Mount Pleasant, Wis.

After the 2002 season, the Red Sox acquired a journeyman hitter who had shown flashes of power in his first few years but wasn't appreciated by his previous team. While J.D. Martinez had better stats than the player Boston signed back in 2003, his impact has been similar. David Ortiz went on to become one of the greatest Red Sox players ever, and while Martinez has a lot of work to do, he's off to a great start.
Bruce Bernstein
West Hartford, Conn.

AS THE CAROUSEL TURNS
I'm the father of an incoming freshman at Kansas State (and a college football fan), and I have to say that the amount of money spent by schools disgusts me. Parents and students are struggling to meet outrageous tuition demands, yet Texas A&M spends $400 million on a stadium upgrade? And an $11 million salary for **Jimbo Fisher** *(below)*?
David Wearing
Belton, Mo.

IMMOVEABLES FEAST
Five young men from Wisconsin on the offensive line, all more than 300 pounds, chowing down on junk food. Is that healthy? Is it something to be celebrated or unbelievably worrisome?
Paul Knopick
Denton, Texas

That isn't the first article in SI this year celebrating NFL or college offensive linemen stuffing themselves with food and drink, either to maintain their gargantuan size or just because they can. Why the continued focus on gluttony?
Bryan Fichter
Ellicott City, Md.

THE ULTIMATE TRIFECTA
The June 18 issue had three covers, each with a different champion on it: the Triple Crown winner, the Stanley Cup champ and the NBA finals winner. The French Open championships happened right within that same time period. I would have liked to see **Rafael Nadal** and **Simona Halep** included in the championship recognition—five champions in four days.
Tommy Boyd
Boone, N.C.

CURTIS COMPTON/TNS/ZUMA WIRE (FISHER); CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES (NADAL); IAN MACNICOL/GETTY IMAGES (HALEP); GREG NELSON (COVER)

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ON DECK
The next edition of Sports Illustrated will be the **September 10, 2018**, issue. Look for it on newsstands and in your mailbox beginning on **September 5**.

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WITTEN'S WISDOM

WILL A ROOKIE ANALYST'S INSIGHTS AND LOVE FOR THE GAME BE ENOUGH TO REVIVE *MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL*?

BY JACK DICKEY
PHOTOGRAPH BY SIMON BRUTY

JASON WITTEN used to shred the Redskins. Over 15 seasons, the Cowboys' shatterproof tight end racked up nine touchdowns and more than 1,400 receiving yards against them. Last week, though, the Washington fans who were lucky—unlucky?—enough to find themselves in the owner's club at FedEx Field before the Jets-Redskins preseason tilt were met with an unfamiliar sight: a nervous Jason Witten.

Sitting in a club chair alone, the 11-time Pro Bowler reviewed his game notes with the assiduousness of a premed student before an organic chemistry final. This was not the usual soft landing for a retired NFL star: Although the calendar read Thursday, Witten was less than an hour away from making his debut as the lead analyst on ESPN's *Monday Night Football*.

The last few years have not been good ones for the NFL or ESPN, and *Monday Night Football* sits at the nexus of these disappointments. Because of its extensive football-centric studio programming, ESPN pays more than any other media entity to air the NFL: $1.9 billion annually through 2021. Yet there's reportedly been tension between the league and the network, in part because of investigative reporting by ESPN's journalists and *MNF*'s recent slates of second-rate contests.

Enter Witten into a revamped *MNF* booth. He'll work alongside Joe Tessitore, the suave play-by-play caller who has been with ESPN since 2002, and field analyst Booger McFarland, the longtime NFL defensive lineman who shuffled over from ESPN's SEC Network. Of last year's on-camera crew, only sideline reporter Lisa Salters remains.

Jay Rothman, the executive producer of *MNF* since 2006, watched a dozen contenders—Louis Riddick, Brett Favre, Greg Olsen and Rex Ryan among them—audition for the lead analyst job by calling a practice game with Tessitore. Witten wasn't the readiest of the bunch, Rothman says, but he was awed by his potential and his standing in the game. "He's so well-respected," says Rothman, who has nicknamed Witten Captain America. "He represents us and the NFL so well. He checks all the boxes."

Turnover is nothing new at *MNF*, and Jon Gruden's return to the sideline in Oakland forced management's hand. But in choosing Witten as its big-ticket hire, ESPN has signaled its belief that *MNF*'s return to glory, 49 seasons in, will come by way of an old-fashioned love letter to the game. "Almost every good thing in my life has come from football," Witten says.

With the new team, chemistry shouldn't be an issue. Tessitore, Witten, and McFarland have spent many late nights together over the past several months, eating steaks, drinking cocktails and singing karaoke. After one such night Rothman made them all attend a 6 a.m. hot yoga session. And they should be able to coexist happily on the broadcast, too. McFarland keeps his remarks succinct, and Tessitore seems not to start a sentence unless he knows where he's going with it.

As a talker, Witten can be a little quiet and folksy, using "pretty neat" as an enthusiastic reaction. But he possesses a handful of traits that any producer would covet: He's humble, he's genial, and few are more knowledgeable about the game or what players go through. Though he was raised in D.C. and Tennessee, not Texas, his cadence and dropped *G*'s call to mind the voice of George W. Bush, whose broad appeal stemmed from being the candidate voters most wanted to have a beer with. Witten says he wants *MNF* viewers to feel like they're having a beer with him, right there, on the couch, as they watch the game together.

He wasn't so at ease on Thursday night, but he's already learning from the game film. He spent the entire offseason watching others, making notes of what makes "a good listen." And he's constantly practicing, pulling up a game or a highlight and mock-calling it into his phone. He'll play it back for himself, make mental notes, and repeat the process over and over again. Even announcing is all about the reps. □

HARD-WON EXPERIENCE

Witten's 179 consecutive starts are a record for tight ends, and his 1,152 career receptions rank him fourth overall in NFL history.

GREG NELSON (WITTEN); AARON M. SPRECHER/AP (FAURIA); JUSTIN K. ALLER/GETTY IMAGES (MCCUTCHEN)

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

FORMER NFL TIGHT END JOSEPH FAURIA ADMITTED HE WAS LYING IN 2014 WHEN HE BLAMED AN ANKLE INJURY ON HIS PUPPY URINATING INSIDE HIS HOUSE.

THEY SAID IT

"BEING IN THE OUTFIELD DURING A BRAWL IS EQUIVALENT TO A LITTLE KID SHOWING UP TO A BIRTHDAY PARTY LATE."

GIANTS RIGHTFIELDER ANDREW MCCUTCHEN, *describing his passive role during San Francisco's bench-clearing fracas with the Dodgers on Aug. 14.*

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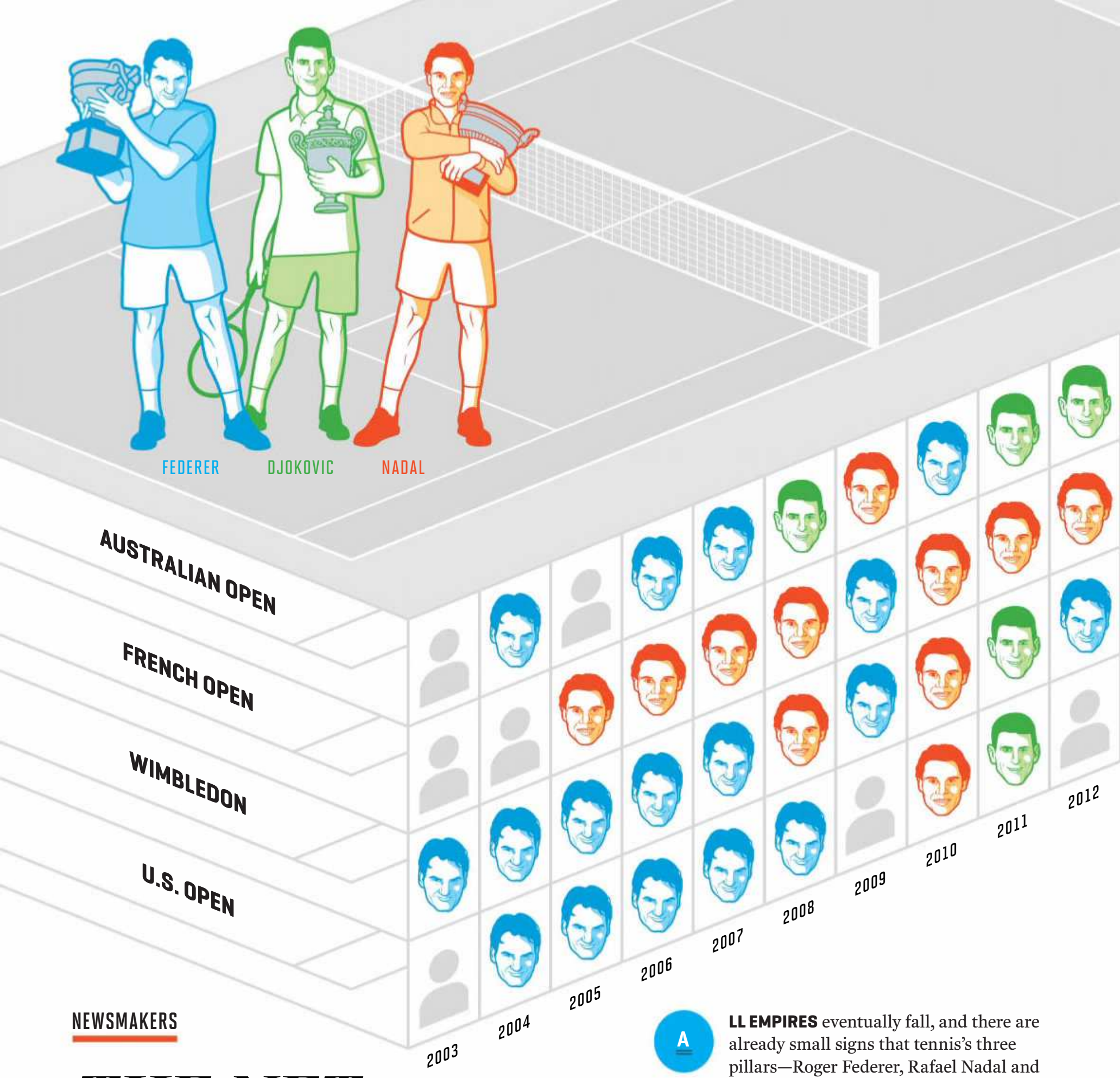

NEWSMAKERS

THE NET GENERATION

WHO WILL REIGN WHEN THE BIG THREE'S DOMINANCE ENDS?

BY L. JON WERTHEIM
ILLUSTRATION BY T.M. DETWILER

ALL EMPIRES eventually fall, and there are already small signs that tennis's three pillars—Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic—are beginning to yield. Federer recently turned 37 and has pared his schedule to prolong his career. Nadal is 32 and ranked No. 1 but is always prone to injury on account of his violent style of play. Djokovic took the Wimbledon title in July, but he's 31 and struggled with a lingering elbow issue earlier this season. We are unlikely to see this kind of contemporaneous tennis excellence again in our lifetime. But there will be champions crowned after the Big Three leave. Herewith a quartet of ascending stars who will win majors one day, perhaps as early as the 2018 U.S. Open, which begins Monday in New York.

FRESH FOES

Serena Williams's return to Flushing Meadows will be the headline, but one of this summer's top story lines has been the nascent rivalry between No. 1 Simona Halep and No. 3 **SLOANE STEPHENS** *(left)*, last year's U.S. Open champion. Halep beat the American in the finals at Roland Garros in June and Montreal this month, but both matches were thrilling three-set slugfests. "She makes me play better and better every time we meet each other," Halep said after her most recent triumph. Is it a full-fledged rivalry? Maybe not yet. But whatever it is, it's heating up. *—Stanley Kay*

• **ALEXANDER ZVEREV** The 6' 6" German turned 21 in April but is already up to No. 4 in the rankings, mostly by dint of his having won three titles over the last year. The next step in his evolution: a run to the semis of a major, a destination he has yet to reach in 16 attempts.

• **STEFANOS TSITSIPAS** Just as basketball has a Greek Freak, so too does tennis. A 6' 4" Athenian who turned 20 on Aug. 12, Tsitsipas has entered the top 30 after reaching the fourth round of Wimbledon and beating Djokovic in Toronto. His flowing one-handed backhand draws inevitable comparisons with Federer; his flowing blond locks draw inevitable comparisons with Bjorn Borg.

• **FRANCES TIAFOE** When his father worked as the handyman of a Maryland tennis club, young Frances often tagged along. Now, at age 20, he is embedded in the top 40 and arrowing ever upward, the brightest American hope in a generation.

• **DENIS SHAPOVALOV** The Israeli-born Canadian is only 19. By his own admission, he's had a "so-so" season. Tough standards, this kid. He's won more than 20 matches and has been ranked as high as No. 23. □

JOHN MINCHILLO/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (STEPHENS); HONGBO CHEN/ACTION PLUS/GETTY IMAGES (SHAPOVALOV); ALEXANDER HASSENSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES (ZVEREV); MATTHEW STOCKMAN/GETTY IMAGES (TIAFOE); ZHONG ZHI/GETTY IMAGES (TSITSIPAS)

A LIFE REMEMBERED

STAN MIKITA
1940–2018

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL LEIFER

IN 1948, after the Communist party had come to power in Czechoslovakia, the parents of Stanislaus Gvoth decided to send the eight-year-old to Canada to live with his aunt and uncle. “When we went to the [train] station, I wrapped my arms around a pole and wouldn’t let go,” Stan said years later.

Eventually he lost his grip—ironic, given that after he had taken his aunt and uncle’s surname, Mikita, and grown to excel at the national sport of his adopted homeland, Stan was known for having some of the strongest wrists anyone had ever seen, thanks to the 50 to 100 push-ups he did every day. “His forearms are so big,” said goalie Glenn Hall, “that his wristwatch would slide off the normal man’s biceps.”

Mikita—who died last week at age 78—was just 5' 9" and 170 pounds, but in his 22 years as a center for the Chicago Blackhawks, he used his powerful arms to dominate face-offs, fire off wrist shots and keep control of the puck against bigger defensemen. “I’m the type that likes to carry it across the blue line and mess around with it until some other guy gets into position for a shot.” When he retired in 1980, only Gordie Howe had more assists than Mikita’s 926.

Late in his career and into retirement, Mikita—who became known to a new generation of fans as the owner of an eponymous doughnut shop in *Wayne’s World*—poured his energy into a hockey school for deaf children. “It’s amazing,” Mikita said in 1997. “Kids are falling all over the place one year, and the next year they’re just scooting all over the ice. It’s always a very rewarding thing to see.” —*Mark Bechtel*

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RAZOR SHARP

LEBRON'S NEW HBO SERIES, SET IN A BARBERSHOP, FEATURES STRAIGHT TALK FROM SPORTS FIGURES

WATCH: THE SHOP

Before LeBron James makes his home debut for the Lakers at Staples Center, he'll star in a different venue: the barbershop. Uninterrupted, the digital media company started by James and Maverick Carter, teamed up with HBO Sports to produce *The Shop*, an unscripted talk show featuring LeBron in conversation—about sports, politics, pop culture, family—with other athletes and celebrities at barbershops around the country. Think *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, only with fewer automobiles and more clippers. "Anyone who has been in a real barbershop knows why this show can be so incredible," James told HBO. In the first episode Jon Stewart asks James about his kids playing basketball. "How do you give them a peace of mind that they don't have to be you?" James responds, "I still regret giving my 14-year-old my name because of that." The show premieres Aug. 28 on HBO.

READ

THE MAN I NEVER MET
by Adam Schefter, out Sept. 4
In his poignant new memoir, co-written with SI senior writer Michael Rosenberg, ESPN NFL insider Adam Schefter describes building a family with a 9/11 widow and her son in the aftermath of tragedy: "This story is about September 12—and every day after."

WATCH

JOHN MCENROE: IN THE REALM OF PERFECTION
In theaters Aug. 22
You cannot be serious! An entire movie about John McEnroe's 1984 French Open? Thankfully, we are. Julien Faraut's documentary, which debuted at February's Berlin Film Festival, intersperses gorgeous 16-mm-shot archival footage of McEnroe's '84 run at Roland Garros with old French tennis instructional films. It's an unconventional portrait of an outsized personality.

FOLLOW

SI GAMBLING *On SI.com and Twitter*
A year ago bookmakers gave the Eagles 40-to-1 odds to win the Super Bowl. You know what happened after that. What NFL team is this year's sneaky gambling pick? The Saints at 16-to-1, according to SI's gambling experts, who point out that New Orleans's defense improved drastically last season and believe the unit will be even better this season. With the start of the season around the corner, time is running out to lock in that and other picks. SI's new gambling vertical will covers odds, analytics, trends and more, the perfect companion for football weekends this fall. Check it out. You can thank us later.

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EATS: FOOD. DRINK. CULTURE. SPORTS.

PIGSKIN PIG OUT

NO FALL FOOTBALL SATURDAY IS COMPLETE WITHOUT A FEAST

BY JAMIE LISANTI

WHETHER IT'S sailgating in Husky Harbor in Washington or huddling in tents at the Grove in Mississippi, a tailgate is a tough place to beat for chowing down before a college football game. But what if you don't have an in at a tailgate? Or what if you just don't feel like grilling? Fear not. There are plenty of great game-day spots around the country where you can load up on eats before—or after—the big game.

CLEMSON

Sampler Platter at The Smokin' Pig

Head south to Pendleton for an overflowing plate of pork, brisket and ribs, plus two sides *(above)*. You might leave feeling like you've got Howard's Rock sitting in your stomach, but it's well worth it.

WEST VIRGINIA

Pepperoni roll at Country Club Bakery

The unofficial state sandwich of pepperoni sticks baked inside soft Italian bread started as a lunch for coal miners in 1927.

OKLAHOMA

Wonderboy at Diamond Dawgs

This famous doawg (locals stretch it to two syllables) is battered in Cap'n Crunch and deep fried.

ALABAMA

BBQ nachos at Big Bad Wolves BBQ

Even Auburn fans can get behind the slow-cooked pulled pork in a mustard-vinegar barbecue sauce.

WISCONSIN

The White Brat at State Street Brats

An all-pork bratwurst is the ultimate game-day food. You're obligated (by law, we're pretty sure) to add a side of cheese curds.

TENNESSEE

The Original Petro at Petro's Chili and Chips

Even on a stifling-hot day you'll see fans chowing down on a bowl of Frito's corn chips topped with chili, cheddar and jack cheeses, tomatoes, green onions and sour cream.

USC

Victory dogs outside L.A. Memorial Coliseum

Served up on street carts outside the stadium, these franks are wrapped in bacon and loaded with grilled onions, peppers and jalapeños.

VIRGINIA TECH

Smoked turkey leg at Lane Stadium

The mascot might take offense, but when a bird's this tasty, we can't resist.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE SMOKIN' PIG; COURTESY OF PETRO'S CHILI AND CHIPS; COURTESY OF BIG BAD WOLVES BBQ; COURTESY OF COUNTRY CLUB BAKERY

Oscar Mayer

THE NATURAL WAY TO SNACK ON-THE-GO

NO ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS

NO ARTIFICIAL PRESERVATIVES

NO ADDED NITRATES OR NITRITES*

DISCOVER A WORLD OF TASTE

*EXCEPT THOSE NATURALLY OCCURRING IN CELERY JUICE AND SEA SALT.

EDGE: GEAR. TECH. FITNESS.

WORKING MOTHER

INTERVIEW BY CHRIS CHAVEZ

TWO YEARS after becoming the first American woman to win gold in the Olympic triathlon, Gwen Jorgensen is celebrating another milestone: her son's first birthday. Last August, Jorgensen gave birth to Stanley, her first child, shortly before announcing she would focus solely on the marathon ahead of Tokyo 2020. Now, Jorgensen is training for her first marathon since maternity leave.

SI: Why is running a sport in which mothers seem to thrive at the world-class level?

GJ: You see the pioneers like [American marathon record holder] Deena Kastor and [two-time Olympian] Kara Goucher, who have a kid and come back. They give a lot of hope and inspiration for want-to-be mothers to compete. You see one person do it and think, If they could do it, I could do it.

SI: You were running and training during your pregnancy. Is that something you'd recommend to an average athlete?

GJ: I would recommend exercising and running if you don't feel pain. I ran hard and got my heart rate up. I had an internal mechanism that wouldn't let me go faster than a certain speed. Our bodies know. Keeping active is good for you and the baby.

SI: How did you know that you were ready to get back into running?

GJ: Everyone is different. For me, it took a while. You have to feel it out. I took seven weeks off and had to start really slow. My first workout was a one-minute run and five-minute walk four times.

SI: How did you remain patient as you returned to training?

GJ: It felt like a year, but it was just two months. I was able to progress quickly. Six months after giving birth, I was running PRs on the track. It's hard to have that perspective when you're going through it. You just need to be patient and kind to yourself. I was really trying to enjoy that time with Stanley because I knew I wouldn't always have the luxury of spending time with him. I can at least be a good mom. □

Presented by edge

PREPARING FOR A RACE ISN'T JUST ABOUT THE MILES. TRY THESE EXERCISES TO SUPPLEMENT YOUR RUNNING ROUTINE

WALL DRIVES

Place your hands on a wall and form a 45-degree angle with the ground. Plant the ball of your left foot on the floor as you spring the right leg forward. Alternate.

RUSSIAN TWISTS

Lie down with your knees bent and feet raised. Lift your upper body to form a *V* with your thighs. Hold a medicine ball and twist your torso from side to side.

WALKING HURDLES

Line up a set of hurdles, their bases touching. Swing your left leg over the first hurdle. Then swing your right leg over the next hurdle. Repeat.

COURTESY OF TALBOT COX

AARP
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2 INTERVIEWS
3 INFORMATIONAL CALLS
AND A NETWORKING EVENT
TODAY

Starting a new career is no easy task, but AARP is here with the tools and resources to help get you as prepared as you can be.

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NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@simail.com**
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **JEREMY FUCHS**

CORY POOLE
- Track and Field
- East Orange, N.J.

Poole, a rising sophomore at Florida, became the third male to win both hurdling events at the U.S. junior track championships. He took the 110 meters in 13.34 and the 400 in 49.71. An All-America in the 400, Poole won bronze in the event at the 2018 SEC championships.

CAITLIN HARRIER
- Powerlifting
- Galena, Mo.

Caitlin, a rising senior at Reeds Spring High, became, at 16 years and 10½ months, the youngest person to reach 100 world records after benching 135 pounds and deadlifting 265 pounds at a meet in Harrison, Ark. She eclipsed Evan Pittman (Faces, Jan. 30, 2017), who did it by age 17.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN
- Golf
- Wellesley, Mass.

Michael, a rising junior at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Fla., beat Akshay Bhatia, the top-ranked junior, 1 up in the 36-hole final at the Junior Amateur at Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield, N.J. He hit a 42-foot birdie putt within two feet on the final hole to help clinch the win.

JORDAN HORSTON
- Basketball
- Columbus, Ohio

Jordan, a rising senior guard at Columbus Africentric Early College, had 12 points, nine rebounds, seven assists and six steals to lead the U.S. to a 92–40 win over France at the U-17 World Cup final in Minsk, Belarus. For Africentric, which won the Div. III state title, she averaged 18.1 points.

NICOLE CONWAY
- Softball
- Tucson

Conway, an incoming freshman at Yale, pitched and won each of the AZ Firecrackers' seven games at the USSSA Far West National Championship. After hurling three no-hitters, the lefthander threw a one-hitter in the final, when she also drove in the game's only run.

UPDATE

Back for More

Matt Klotz appeared in Faces in the Crowd in the Aug. 14, 2017, issue of SI after setting the world record in the 50-meter backstroke for deaf swimmers at the 2017 Deaflympics in Samsun, Turkey—while battling the flu. That mark has now been broken—by Klotz. At the U.S. national championships in Irvine, Calif., in July, the LSU junior swam the event in 25.95. Later in the meet he set a deaf record in the 50-meter free with a time of 23.14. In all Klotz, a native of Cameron Park, Calif., now has four deaf world records, the most of anyone. Last year, in addition to winning four medals—three gold—at the Deaflympics, he was named the USA Deaf Sports Federation Sportsman of the Year. Klotz will now look to improve his spots in the LSU record book: His time of 1:43.55 in the 200-back is the second fastest by any swimmer in Tigers history. —J.F.

TIM CASEY (POOLE); TOM HARRIER (HARRIER); USGA (THORBJORNSEN); GARRETT W. ELLWOOD/USA BASKETBALL (HORSTON); KEVIN CONWAY (CONWAY); SAM CRAFT (KLOTZ)

ALL THE ELECTROLYTES*.
ZERO SUGAR.

*Same electrolytes as regular Gatorade. GATORADE and G DESIGN are registered trademarks of Stokely-Van Camp, Inc. ©2018 S-VC, Inc.

BRINGING UP THE HOUSE
Davis's second homer of the game, against the Astros on Aug. 19, brought fans and the A's, including Manaea (with left arm in towel) and Chapman (right, without cap), to their feet.

The JOYS *Of* SUMM

A CAST OF UNDERVALUED PLAYERS MAKING NOISE IN OAKLAND

A'S OF 2018 *ARE WINNING WITH A DIFFERENT FORMULA THAN T*

E R

BY *EMMA BACCELLIERI*

Photograph by
JORDAN NAHOLOWA'A MURPH

? YUP, YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE. BUT THE
HEIR PREDECESSORS OF 2002—AND IT MIGHT WORK IN OCTOBER

"HE'S GOOD. Actually, he's *really* good."

Oakland outfielder Matt Joyce is discussing the talent of teammate Blake Treinen. The All-Star reliever has a sinker that can touch triple digits, dropping cartoonishly out of the strike zone, and a slider that elicits violent swings with absurd misses. His 0.87 ERA is the lowest in baseball, and he has not allowed a home run since the first week of the season.

But Joyce isn't talking about any of that. Instead he's critiquing the pitcher's skills as an artist. Treinen has just put the finishing touches on a portrait of the team's catcher, Jonathan Lucroy; his medium of choice today is marker, and his canvas is a fully inflated balloon. The final product bears a striking resemblance to the backstop, with his full beard and a few crinkles sketched in around the eyes. When Lucroy enters the clubhouse and finds the balloon taped to the wall next to his locker, he declares the effort "impressive."

It's not that the catcher's locker needs further decoration. The balloon is just the most recent addition to a makeshift gallery in Lucroy's corner of the clubhouse, an eclectic collection that's grown through the season to include everything from inspirational posters to team mementos. "I got here, and there was this big open wall," says Lucroy, who left the Rockies and signed with the A's last winter. "I was like—you know, I'm going to start decorating because it's kind of sparse in here. So I just went on Amazon and got some stuff."

One poster declares PARDON MY SWAG: EPIC CONTENT. Another is an advertisement for the men's clothing brand Chubbies, known for short shorts ("Sky's out, thighs out"). There are snapshots of the season's biggest clubhouse celebrations: after Sean Manaea's no-hitter against the Red Sox on April 21, and Edwin Jackson's 100th career win on July 30. There's a card that the team made for rookie pitcher Lou Trivino back in June, when he gave up his first home run. YOU'VE STILL GOT IT, BABE, the loopy script reads, complete with an illustration of a ball leaving the yard.

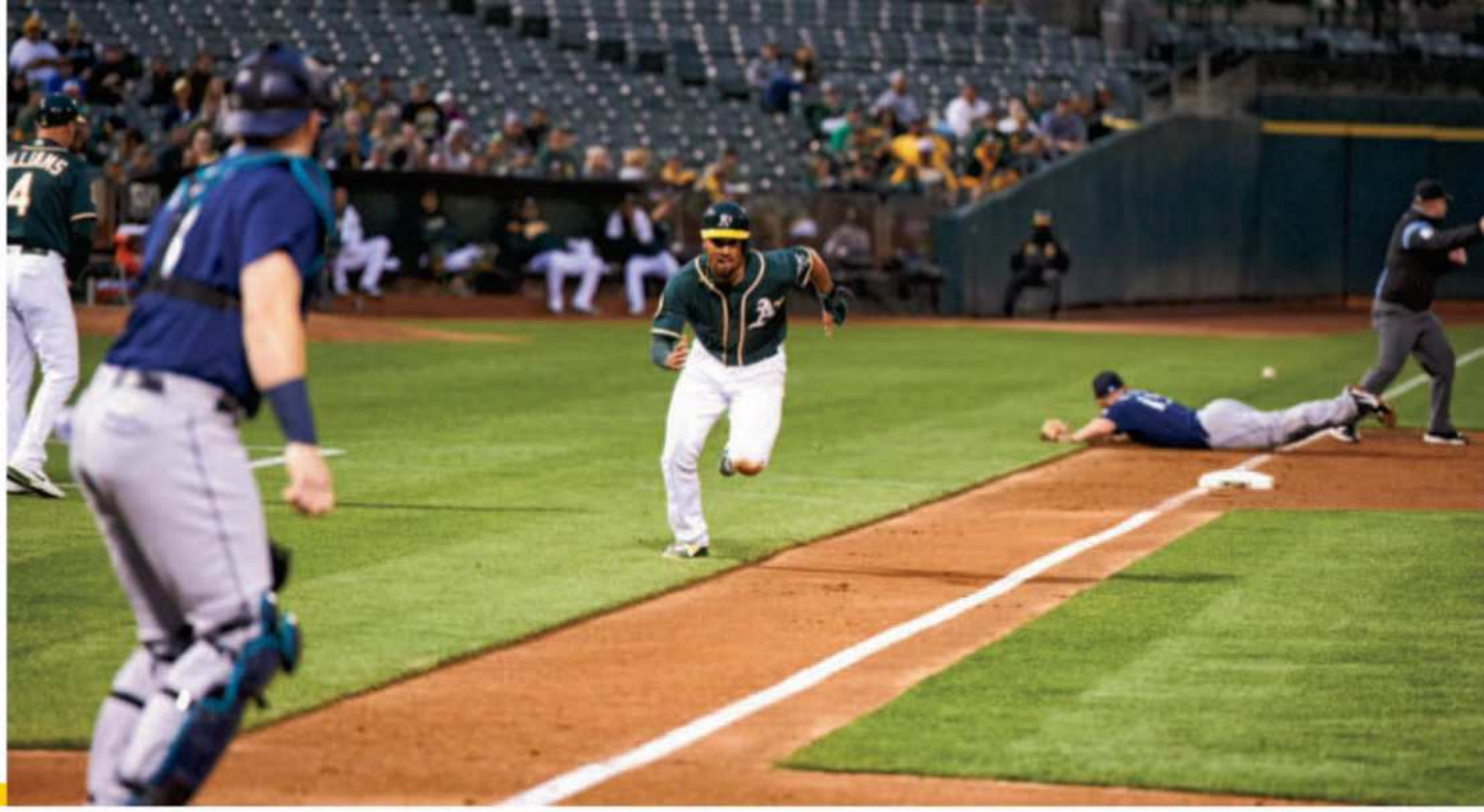
"Everything kind of started with the cat poster, and it grew from there," says Joyce, whose locker is next to Lucroy's. The cat referred to is clinging to a rope, HANG IN THERE! written above its head—the archetypical cheesy motivational sign.

The cat poster may have been hung as a joke, but the team has taken its message seriously. As September draws near, the A's are doing more than hanging in there. They're near the top of a competitive division, and they're one of the hottest squads in baseball. Just how much ground have they covered? On June 15, Oakland was 11½ games back of first place, with a 34–36 record and postseason chances so slim they were almost invisible (hovering around 3%, according to MLB.com projections). Then the A's won their next five games. That streak became a stretch when they won 12 of 15, and *that* became a stretch when they won 40 of 54. As a result, Oakland has been holding down a wild-card spot since Aug. 2, and, more than that, after taking two of three from the world champion Astros on the weekend of Aug. 17–19, the team has emerged as a true challenger to Houston for first place in the AL West.

If this sounds like a story that you've heard before, well, in a sense, it is. The A's have found a way to win—again—despite having every reason to lose. The team is operating under the same set of financial and physical constraints that has ruled it for years. The A's began the season with baseball's smallest payroll, $66 million, less than a third of that of their rivals across the Bay (the

"WE THOUGHT WE WERE BETTER TH
"WHICH IS NOT TO SAY THAT I EXPE

MICHAEL ZAGARIS/OAKLAND ATHLETICS/GETTY IMAGES



AN SOME OF THE EXTERNAL VOICES WERE GIVING US CREDIT FOR," SAYS FORST.
CTED US TO BE HOLDING DOWN A PLAYOFF SPOT IN AUGUST."

Giants) and less than half of each of the other teams in their division. They have a .597 winning percentage while San Francisco is at .488, the Angels are at .500, and the Rangers are at .444. The Oakland ballpark is a crumbling dinosaur of concrete, which can most charitably be described as unfashionable and more accurately described as uninhabitable. In a move that feels almost a little too on-the-nose, the A's latest beverage deal is not with Coke or Pepsi, but instead with the company behind RC Cola. Meanwhile, low attendance remains a concern, as it does every year. Despite its success, the team is averaging 18,850 fans per game at home, second lowest in the AL (ahead of only Tampa Bay). The sparse crowds at Oakland–Alameda County Coliseum have been the backdrop for all of the franchise's on-field successes and failures, as they have been for some time.

Yet Oakland has made eight trips to the playoffs since 2000. Why should a ninth, in 2018, feel surprising?

THE A'S last postseason push was just four years ago, but you could be forgiven for thinking that it seems like ancient history. The current team bears little resemblance to the one that lost a one-game wild-card playoff to the Royals in 2014, with only one player from that squad remaining in the clubhouse today. (That's 34-year-old infielder Jed Lowrie, though even he spent one season with the Astros before being traded back to Oakland.) If the roster turnover wasn't enough to make that postseason trip feel distant, then the team's performance over the last few years should have done the trick. The A's finished last in 2015, and again in 2016, and yet *again* in 2017. In the half-century since the franchise moved west, it had never before had such an extended stay in the basement, and a stretch like that is enough to make competitive baseball seem like a very faint memory indeed.

STADE OF THE ART

The decor in Lucroy's corner of the A's clubhouse (left) echoes the varied collection on the Oakland roster, which includes Semien (above), who scored in a 7–6 home win over the Mariners on Aug. 13.

What has stayed in Oakland, through that roster churn and last-place seasons? Skipper Bob Melvin, who has managed the team with an avuncular calm since 2011, and the front office, which has been familiar to fans since the publication of *Moneyball* in 2003. Executive vice president of baseball operations Billy Beane has been in charge for more than two decades now; general manager David Forst, Beane's right-hand man, has held a central leadership role for nearly a decade and a half.

The 2018 A's were built to be better than the 2017 A's, in large part through a young core that would only benefit from more time to develop. Most preseason projections had the team improving by two or three wins—moving from last place to fourth, maybe with a win total pushing 80. Certainly nothing like this.

"We knew the way we played the last two months of the season last year that we were hopefully going to get better," says Forst, referring to the team's 23–20 record

JORDAN NAHOLOWA'A MURPH

after last Aug. 15. "We thought we were better than some of the external voices were giving us credit for. Which is not to say that I expected us to be holding down a playoff spot in August, but we liked the group we had."

As the team recovered from a lukewarm start and began its hot streak in the weeks leading up to the July 31 trade deadline, Beane and Forst began to get questions about what course they wanted to pursue. At first, they weren't sure. In early July, the team took two of three in Cleveland and three of four in Houston. "At least in the short term, that made up our minds to do what we could to add to this group," Forst says.

The additions were modest, but they came in crucial spots. Right out of spring training, starter Jharel Cotton and top pitching prospect A.J. Puk both went down and required Tommy John surgery. A few months later, Opening Day starter Kendall Graveman was sidelined with the same injury. Only Manaea has been healthy enough to stick in the rotation all season, so 13 different pitchers have started a game in 2018. The list includes veteran castoffs Trevor Cahill and Brett Anderson, who over his last three starts has allowed two earned runs in 19⅔ innings. Then there's the 34-year-old Jackson, who was cut by the Nationals' Triple A Syracuse team on June 1, signed by the A's on June 6 and called up from Nashville three weeks later. Over his last three starts, he has allowed a total of 13 hits and two earned runs in 18⅔ innings. "The fact is, we needed starting pitching wherever it was available," says Forst.

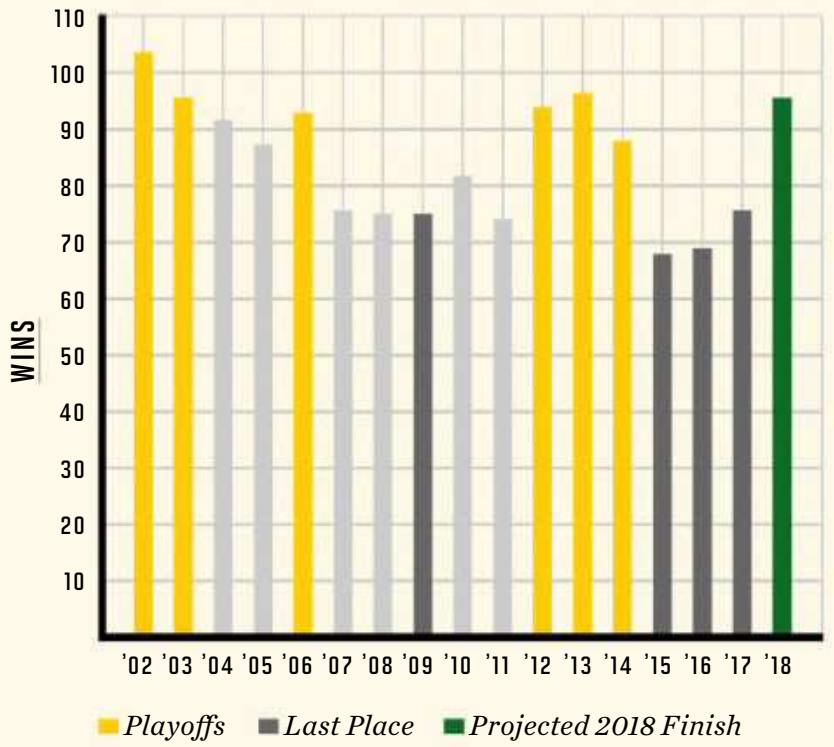
The bullpen got a three-headed boost from acquisitions Jeurys Familia, Fernando Rodney and Shawn Kelley. The players took those moves as a vote of confidence—particularly in an era when a club on the verge of contention is just as likely to rebuild as it is to gear up for a run.

"The organization got behind us," says Treinen. "They never weren't, but when you make moves—it just shows that much more support when you're bringing guys in as opposed to shipping guys out. That's what baseball needs: more teams willing to buy into what they have, as opposed to saying, 'We're going to sell out for losing 100,' or 'We're going to sell out for winning 100.' This is a kind of model team to look back at and say, Everybody in the big leagues is talented; you've just got to get the right guys in and mesh as a team."

Perhaps no team in recent history has been revisited as often as the famed 2002 A's of *Moneyball*. (Of course, people are inclined to look back at a team whose GM is played by Brad Pitt.) But in a decade and a half, any advantage the A's had in assembling their club the way they did have disappeared. Now, in every front office there's a legion of analysts with access to a wide variety of data on players at every level. There's a strong industry consensus on which metrics communicate meaningful information. There's a wealth of public scholarship available on all of this. The legend of the *Moneyball* A's was based on identifying players with skills that were undervalued by the baseball market, but it's an awful lot more difficult to do that when the entire market calculates value the same way.

WIN CYCLE

MAKE THE PLAYOFFS, RETOOL AND ENDURE A LOSING STRETCH, REPEAT. . . . THE SUCCESS OF THE 2018 A'S FOLLOWS A PATTERN THAT BEGAN WITH THE 2002 SEASON OF MONEYBALL



It's increasingly tricky to identify players who are undervalued. Maybe the next model team won't be one that finds value in individual players. Maybe it will be a team that finds value in how players *fit together*—in getting the right guys in to mesh well, as Treinen puts it.

Look at Oakland's starting pitching. The rotation doesn't strike out too many guys. Hardly any, in fact—their starters are 28th in strikeout percentage. Instead, they generate a ton of ground balls, second most of any rotation in the league (behind the Rangers'), and few fly balls. They have the highest ground-ball-to-fly-ball ratio in the league. How to make the most of this? With a stellar defense to make sure those ground balls get put away. The A's have that. They're first in defensive efficiency, which measures the percentage of balls in play that a team converts into outs. Another way to complement this rotation: a deep bullpen that can be trusted. As of Aug. 19, Oakland relievers' 3.34 ERA is the fifth lowest in baseball and the team is

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

FALL GUYS
In his first full season as the A's closer, Treinen (left) has a major-league-low 0.87 ERA; Chapman, 25, is already one of the best defensive third basemen in the game.

BEN MARGOT/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

51–0 when ahead in the seventh inning or later.

The offense, meanwhile, is the opposite of the rotation: The A's hit more fly balls than any other team, and fewer ground balls than all but the Twins. Four of the team's everyday hitters—Lowrie, Khris Davis, Matt Olson and Matt Chapman—hit fly balls on more than 35% of their swings making contact. Oakland batters work deep into counts, averaging more pitches per at bat than any other team in the league. When they finally see something that they like, they bring some serious power to it, with baseball's fourth-best slugging percentage (.432).

"There's a lot of talent here, but there's no big-name guy," says Lucroy. "There's no $20 million-a-year player. Nothing like that. We've got guys who I call 'blue-collar grinders.' Guys who just play hard and are good teammates with good chemistry. I think that's why we're playing so well, because of how tight we are."

That's not to say that there aren't players on the roster with standout skills. Treinen is emerging as one of baseball's best relievers, and Trivino isn't far behind him. Davis is a bona fide slugger, and Olson is a slick-fielding first baseman with some serious pop. Perhaps most dazzling is Chapman, who makes defense at the hot corner look like fine art. The 25-year-old, in just his second year in the big leagues, has impressive range, quick reflexes and a killer arm. In fielding runs above average, Chapman is the only third baseman in double digits, at 14.1—almost twice the mark, for example, of elite fielder Nolan Arenado (7.3) of Colorado. "He just seems, defensively, like a once-in-a-generation player," says Lowrie, who played in infields with Carlos Correa in Houston and Dustin Pedroia in Boston.

Chapman's defense was never in question; the uncertainty lay at the plate. But he has cut down on strikeouts this season (from 28.2% in 2017 to 22.5%) and boosted his OPS by nearly 100 points. After shortening his swing and restructuring his BP routine to include hitting off a tee before stepping into the cage, he's been moved up from fifth or sixth in the order to the two-hole, and he's taken well to it. Chapman's ceiling is no longer becoming baseball's best defensive third baseman; it's quite possibly becoming baseball's best third baseman, period.

THERE'S MORE to a team's connectivity than complementary components. There may not be a way to quantify clubhouse chemistry—yet—but it's an element that comes up repeatedly in discussions of Oakland's success. And it's one area where their obsolete stadium might actually be an asset.

"This place is different from most clubhouses," says shortstop Marcus Semien. "It's only this room here. There's not a players' lounge or multiple rooms where people can hang out, so I think that has a lot to do with why we're so close."

There's no room for a pool table or fancy gaming equipment. Instead, there's a Nerf basketball hoop taped over the lockers, next to a single sheet of paper that serves as a running scoreboard for both free throw contests and P-I-G. (Scrawled at the bottom, a reminder of the fine for dunking: $100.) There's some space to play cards in front of a television; there's some space to sit down and eat; for the more intellectually inclined, there are fresh crosswords and sudoku puzzles printed every day. That's about it. But no one seems to mind.

"This is one of the tighter groups I've ever had, if not the tightest," Melvin says.

It's a close team that thrives in close games. More than a third of A's victories have come by one run, and their winning percentage in one-run games is .722, best in the majors. In a crucial series recently against division rival Seattle, they won two games by one run and lost the third by two runs in extra innings. Even after that loss, the team's mood was light, with guys taking turns picking the music on the clubhouse stereo. Lucroy had done the math, and he had a simple message to share with his teammates:

"If we win two out of three in every series for the rest of the way, we're going to win the World Series." □

42 *and* FAB

HIS LATE CHARGE AT THE PGA CAME UP JUST SHORT, BUT IT SERVED AS A REMINDER THAT* TIGER WOODS *CAN STILL THRILL US LIKE NO ONE ELSE—AND THAT HIS PURSUIT OF THE GOLDEN BEAR'S RECORD OF 18 MAJOR VICTORIES IS BACK ON, AGE BE DAMNED

BY
MICHAEL ROSENBERG

Photographs by
DAVID E. KLUTHO

U L O U S

ON A ROLL
After a mediocre start, Woods closed out the PGA at Bellerive with three rounds of 66 or better.

IF YOU watched Brooks Koepka as he shot a final-round 66 to win the PGA Championship and wondered how he got there, the answer was walking down a nearby fairway at Bellerive Country Club in St. Louis. As Koepka said, "The whole reason that people in my generation are even playing golf was because of him." And surely we don't have to tell you who *him* refers to.

Koepka has won three majors in 14 months, and so by all rights and logic, when we talk about pro golfers, right now, he should have honors and lead off the conversation. But as the perpetually overlooked Koepka knows, that isn't how this works. The biggest story at Bellerive was not the champion. It was the man who shot 64 on Sunday to finish second. Said the 28-year-old Koepka, "It brought me back to when I was a kid, and when I was watching him and you heard those roars."

The Tiger Woods story again feels like it did a decade ago, when it felt both absurdly impossible and utterly familiar. Woods briefly had the Sunday lead at the British Open before falling into a tie for sixth. Then came that charge at the PGA, where Woods came up short of victory but got the sports world thinking, once again, about the long game. Woods turns 43 in December. If he stays healthy, what else can he achieve?

As much as any athlete of the last 50 years, Woods has managed to put outsized expectations in front of a fun-house mirror and make them look reasonable. Before Woods turned pro, Jack Nicklaus said he should win more than 10 Masters. By the time Woods turned 30, in 2005, he had won 10 majors and looked certain to win 15 more.

He has been stuck on 14 majors since 2008, but those expectations continue to infect every assessment of Woods. In recent years, when it was clear that back injuries had sapped Woods of his skills, one good round would create illogical buzz. The expectations bring backlash, too: Last week, Golf Channel commentator Brandel Chamblee, a frequent Woods critic, went on a podcast and said, "I would argue he got the least out of his talent of any player, maybe in history." Woods has 79 PGA Tour wins, including those 14 majors. (We need a term for an otherwise erudite person digging so deep into a position that he says ridiculous things without even realizing it: a verb, to *chamblee*.)

Woods has not won a tournament in five years, but golf fans are far more excited about his next year than they are about, say, the future exploits of Dustin Johnson. The next major, of course, is the Masters in April. There are many reasons to like Woods's chances. He has won the green jacket four times. The course favors experience and creativity, which Woods has in abundance, and forgives wayward drives, which Woods hits with regularity.

Then come two majors at courses that, as Woods might say, fit his eye. The PGA moves to May, and to Bethpage Black on Long Island, where Woods won the 2002 U.S. Open and finished tied for sixth at the 2009 Open. In June the U.S. Open returns to Pebble Beach, the site of his most impressive win. Woods finished 12 under at the 2000 Open; everybody else finished at least three over—and also six feet under.

Woods needs four wins to pass Sam Snead for most victories in PGA Tour history. He also needs four more majors to tie Nicklaus's record. Are we getting ahead of ourselves? Absolutely. But one of Woods's great feats this year is that he suddenly seems young again . . . which, by golf's historical standards, he sort of is.

Any talk about legendary golfers winning majors at an advanced age starts with Nicklaus's winning the 1986 Masters at 46. It is perhaps the most famous victory in golf history, but time has distorted its meaning. We remember Nicklaus, tongue out and putter extended, watching his putt on 16 drop, but what we forget is that he was barely even a professional golfer at the time, ranking 160th on the Tour money list entering that Masters. He was preoccupied with rescuing his foundering business. When Nicklaus shot 69 in the third round at Augusta, he said it was "the first time I've broken 70 since I can't remember when." Nicklaus's win in '86 was not like Tom Brady's being the best player in the NFL in his 40s; it was the equivalent of Peyton Manning's signing with a team in December and winning the Super Bowl two months later.

Winning a major as a fortysomething is not as crazy as it sounds. There is ample evidence it can be done, and not just by legends. Jerry Barber won his only major, the 1961 PGA, at age 45. Roberto De Vicenzo

THE OLD GUARD

Woods turns 43 in December, which means he can't crack the list of the five oldest major winners until the 2021 Masters

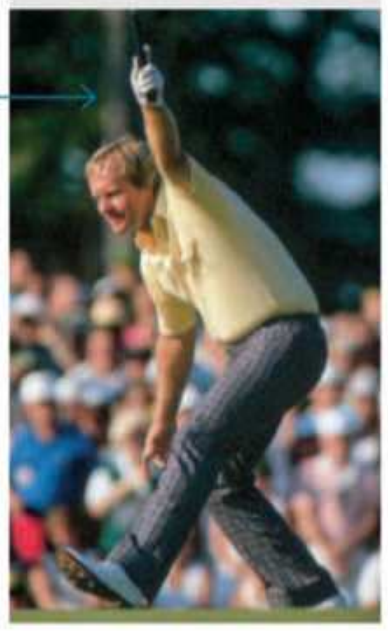
JULIUS BOROS
1968 PGA Championship, 48 years, 4 months, 18 days

OLD TOM MORRIS
1867 British Open, 46 years, 3 months, 10 days

JACK NICKLAUS
1986 Masters, 46 years, 2 months, 23 days

JERRY BARBER
1961 PGA Championship, 45 years, 3 months, 6 days

HALE IRWIN
1990 U.S. Open, 45 years, 15 days



JOHN IACONO

UPSTAGED
Koepka (above) hoisted the Wanamaker Trophy—his third major in 14 months—but Woods drew the biggest roars from the crowd.

won his only major, the British, at 44, and he famously blew the 1968 Masters by signing an incorrect scorecard on his 45th birthday (or as he probably would have called it, his 47th birthday).

Two months after Nicklaus won that Masters, Raymond Floyd won the U.S. Open at age 43. Floyd would be one of the best golfers in the world throughout his 40s; he lost a Masters playoff when he was 47. Floyd's contemporary Hale Irwin won the 1990 U.S. Open at 45.

Most golfers do not peak in their 40s—but some do. Mark O'Meara won his only two majors, the 1998 Masters and U.S. Open, at 41. Woods already enjoyed the greatest peak in golf history; as long as his fused back holds up, he has a better chance of contending in his mid- to late 40s than anybody else.

Most of the best golfers in history landed on major-championship leader boards at an advanced age. Nicklaus tied for sixth at the Masters at 58. Tom Watson was an eight-foot putt away from winning the British Open at age 59. Ben Hogan recorded three top 10s in majors after he turned 50. Sam Snead finished in the top 10 at the PGA Championship three times in his 60s.

Yes, yes: This is a different era. Snead never looked across the fairway and saw a hunk of muscle like Koepka. But Woods still has the length and swing speed to compete with anybody. And with modern club and ball technology, it is hard to envision any course being too long for Woods.

This fall Woods is expected to play Phil Mickelson in a $10 million match play event. It will excite some fans, annoy only the most extreme purists, and ultimately mean nothing except to the two men and their accountants. But while they are out there, playfully talking trash and firing at pins, Woods can see a bit of his future self in his longtime rival. Mickelson is the embodiment of what Woods can still achieve, but also how hard it will be.

Mickelson won the 2013 British Open at 43, the same age Woods will be next year. He has finished second in three majors since. He will probably get picked for the Ryder Cup team at age 48. But Mickelson's dream of winning a U.S. Open (and finishing his career Grand Slam) is fading. He has won one tournament in the last five years.

The margin between winning and losing is thinner than a skulled 3-iron. On Woods's second hole at the PGA, he hit his tee shot into the left rough. The pin was 119 yards away, but it was protected by water on the right. Woods said later, "I was trying to hit the ball left of the hole. I stuck in the ground and hit it short right." It landed in the water. If he had taken a more conservative line or made cleaner contact, he probably would have made par there, and maybe right now you would be reading a story about Tiger Woods winning his 15th major. Instead he made double bogey. He played his next 70 holes in 17 under par, but still could not catch Koepka.

In the big races of his career—his quests to surpass Nicklaus and Snead—Woods built up a huge lead, then stalled. He is picking up speed again. It will be fun to see how far he can go. □

WELCOME BACK...

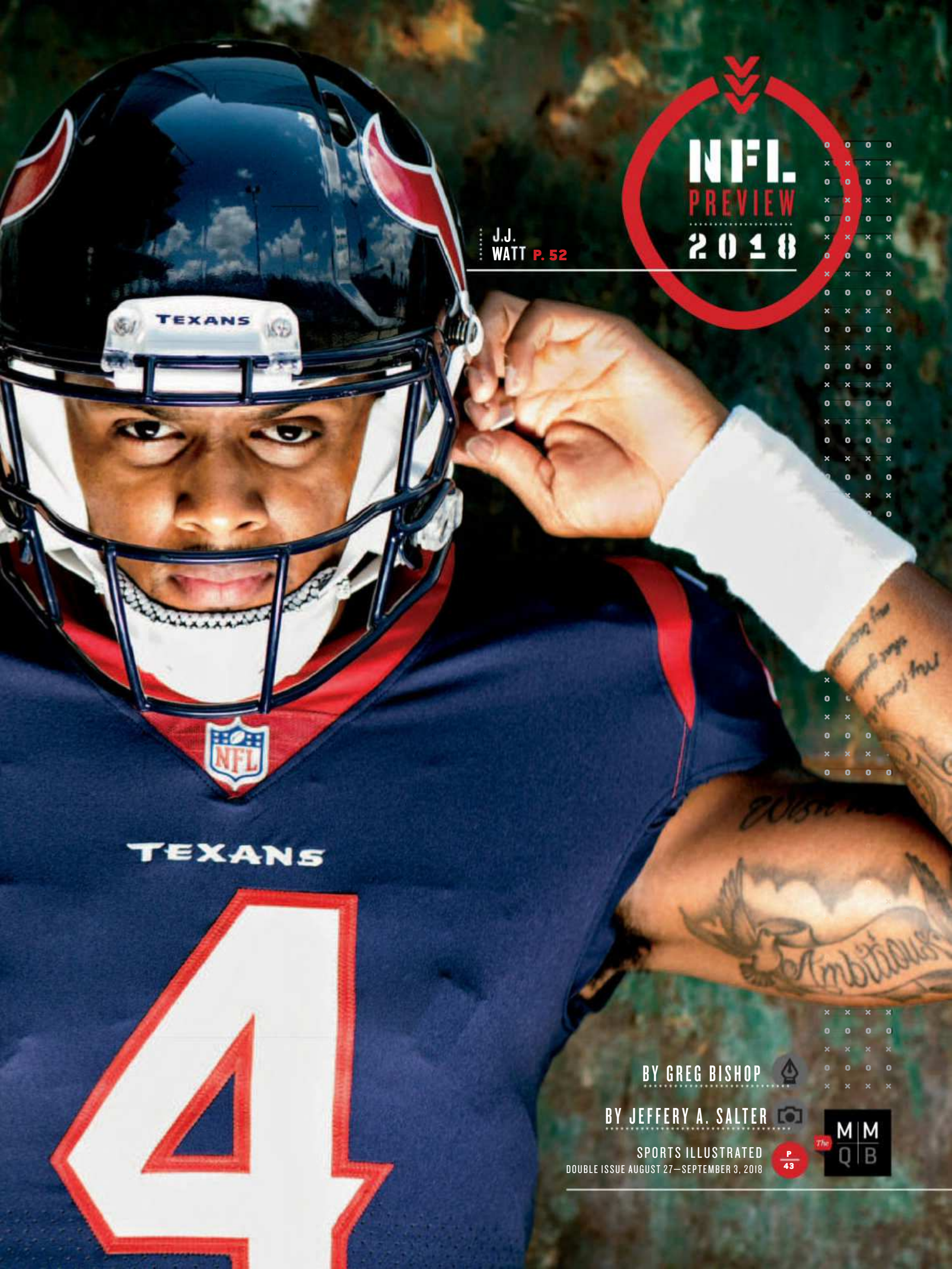
DESHAUN WATSON

& ANDREW LUCK P. 47 | CARSON WENTZ P. 48 | AARON RODGERS P. 50

SAME OLD STORY

He begins as a backup. He takes over the starting job. HE PUTS UP INSANE NUMBERS—then tears an ACL.

You think the Texans' QB—one of dozens of stars who missed major time in 2017—won't come back stronger? His past says: Think again. . . .



NFL PREVIEW 2018

J.J. WATT P. 52

BY GREG BISHOP

BY JEFFERY A. SALTER

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The MMQB

WELCOME BACK. . .

DESHAUN WATSON | RICHARD SHERMAN | ERIC BERRY | DAVID JOHNSON | ODELL BECKHAM JR. | JASON PETERS | DARREN SPROLES | DALVIN COOK

A LARGER-THAN-NORMAL contingent of observers shuffled onto the Texans' sidelines at a practice last November for a business-as-usual Thursday afternoon training session. The team had invited local members of all the military branches and their relatives, plus the families of players and staff. They could shake hands, collect autographs, get an inside peek at a playoff contender and, of particular interest that week, meet the rookie rocketing into the MVP race.

Four days earlier Deshaun Watson had thrown for 402 yards and scored four touchdowns against the Seahawks' fearsome defense—on the road. The fact that his seventh straight *Did-he-really-just-do-that?* performance ended in a loss mattered little. No rookie had ever tossed 19 TD passes in his first seven games. It would turn out to be, arguably, the single best stretch by any NFL player, of any experience level, at any position, in all of 2017.

Earlier that morning the NFL had named Watson the AFC Offensive Player of the Month for October. Now the fans were tracking his every movement, training their cellphones on his throws, following him as he scooted around right end on a random play and fell to the turf without being touched.

While Watson left the field immediately, he told doctors there was no reason to worry; he'd just landed awkwardly, causing his right knee to lock up. He figured he'd be back to face the Colts on Sunday, if not for Friday's practice. But not everyone shared his confidence. As coach Bill O'Brien left the field, his wife, Colleen, stopped him. "That didn't look so good," she said. "I don't think it was," he responded.

Actually it was worse. "Felt totally normal," Watson says, seven months later. "Then we got the MRI back. Torn ACL."

Watson called his family in Georgia, then his agent, then pivoted into . . . *film study*. He sat in his living room, knowing his cometlike first season was over, and went over that Sunday's game plan again. Later that night he told his private QB coach, Quincy Avery, that as far as ACL tears go this was a clean one—no other ligament damage. Best-case scenario: He'd be back to full health in six months. The next morning, he reported back to

ERICK W. RASCO

RYAN TANNEHILL | JULIAN EDELMAN | DONALD PENN | ALLEN ROBINSON | JORDAN REED | TRENT WILLIAMS | PIERRE GARÇON | SAM BRADFORD

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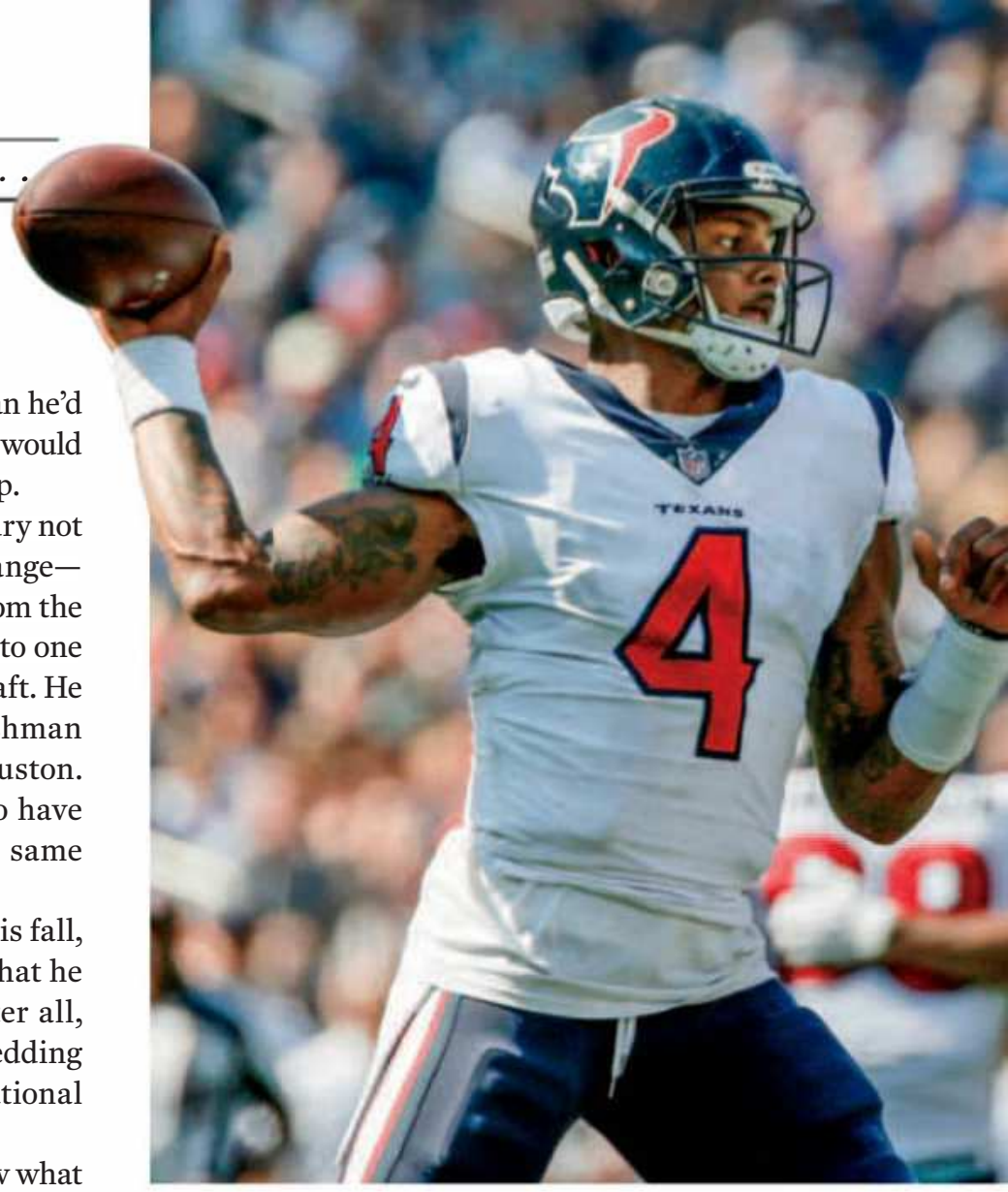
HYPER PACE

Project Watson's 19 rookie TD passes over a full season and you get 43, eighth most alltime.

AP/SHUTTERSTOCK



2 NRG Park, wondering if Tom Savage, the veteran he'd replaced at halftime of the season opener and who would now be taking over under center, needed any help.

From the beginning, Watson looked at his injury not as the saddest of setbacks but as yet another strange—but familiar—twist in his career. He had gone from the 12th-best high school football player (according to one ranking service) to the No. 12 pick in the NFL draft. He hadn't been the opening day starter in his freshman year at Clemson or in his rookie season in Houston. Then he quickly took over both teams—only to have each of those campaigns end when he tore the same ligament, once on each leg.

Before the most recent surgery, a week after his fall, Watson joked to then Texans GM Rick Smith that he hoped history would repeat itself. He had, after all, gone 28–2 at Clemson after his return from shredding the ACL in his left knee, twice reaching the national championship game.

"I've been through this," he told Smith. "I know what I gotta do."

SO ABOUT that Michael Jordan comparison?

The man who coached Watson and the Tigers to the 2016 national championship laughs. "I know, I know," says Dabo Swinney. "I had trouble articulating what I think his greatness is."

To be clear, Swinney is not apologizing. Yes, he was at the Senior Bowl in January 2017. And—*hell, yes!*—he told reporters that any team drafting someone other than Watson that spring was passing on the quarterbacking equivalent of MJ. However outrageous that sounds, Swinney stands by what he said. Even if it's not *exactly* what he meant.

It's just that Swinney *knew* Watson. After watching the QB play for the first time at Gainesville (Ga.) High, Tigers assistant coach Chad Morris called Swinney to say he'd discovered a young Vince Young . . . only better. Swinney knew that Watson had spent his early childhood in government housing, surrounded by gangs and drugs. That his mother raised six kids, worked three jobs and still volunteered for Habitat for Humanity (which later gifted the Watsons a house). That she beat tongue cancer. That the young man had written out his goals at Clemson—win the ACC title and the national championship, become a Heisman finalist, graduate in three years—and that he'd checked each of them off. He knew Watson was ready for anything.

Swinney did *not* know how to winnow all that into a sound bite, though, so he took the quarterback who'd forever changed his program and compared him with his own hero, Michael Jordan. As that quote went viral,

MY DEAR WATSON

Clues about the QB's future were abundant in 2017: 8.3 yards per attempt, a 103.0 passer rating. . . .

spawning laughter and outrage, memes and a fair amount of mockery, Swinney called Watson to warn him: "I think I owe you an apology."

The QB just laughed. "I knew exactly what Coach meant," he says.

SO DID Smith, who had scouted the 6' 3", 215-pound Watson in person several times. At the national championship game in 2017, the Texans' GM sat next to a woman who worked in the university's football office. She wouldn't stop raving, unprompted, about Watson's character.

While other teams talked themselves out of one of the most successful players in college football—worrying that maybe Clemson's spread offense wouldn't translate to the NFL, citing Watson's 17 interceptions as a junior—Smith played it cool, waiting until the week before the draft to bring the prospect in for a visit.

Smith agreed with Houston's quarterbacks coach, Sean Ryan, who calls that position the most "overscrutinized, overanalyzed in sports," and so he strategically sat back and let other teams talk themselves into North Carolina's Mitchell Trubisky and Texas Tech's Patrick Mahomes, based on what they *might* do, overlooking what Watson had *already* done. ("I quit trying

AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

ARIK ARMSTEAD | WHITNEY MERCILUS | DEREK WOLFE

to figure out the NFL draft a long time ago," Swinney says. "Just blows my mind.")

Not that Smith dismissed Watson's flaws. "Sometimes he'd throw that thing and hit the Gatorade cooler," Smith says. But he also believed any accuracy issues were outweighed by simple stats like his 90 TDs and 38–5 record. So he arranged a dinner on April 18 at the swanky Steak 48 restaurant in Houston, reserving a banquet table for Texans coaches and a few other potential draftees in town, as well as a smaller setup in back so he could pull Watson aside for a quick *Godfather*-style one-on-one. Smith explained to Watson the expectations awaiting him should he, by some miracle, fall to the Texans at No. 25. Houston had a top five passing and scoring D, with stars in J.J. Watt, Whitney Mercilus and Jadeveon Clowney. They had an All-Pro receiver in DeAndre Hopkins and had scared the Patriots that winter in a playoff game that might have gone the Texans' way if not for some special teams gaffes and, well, Brock Osweiler.

Unless anyone was counting Matt Schaub (they weren't) the last transformative NFL passer in Houston was Warren Moon, another reserved superstar, who had left town after the 1993 season. Twenty-five years later—a span covering two franchises, a 10-year gap without a team, an expansion draft, then David Carr and Ryan Fitzpatrick and Osweiler—Houstonians were still waiting.

At Steak 48, Watson crushed a playbook-sized rib-eye and his own seafood tower. Then he called Morris. The Texans, he said, seemed perfect. He wanted to play there. But he also guessed he wouldn't last past the Browns at No. 12

The next day Watson visited Houston's facility. He met with O'Brien, went over the offense and at one point even winked at the coach while diagramming a play on the whiteboard. ("Kind of killed it," Watson says.) Then he lunched in the cafeteria, where other visiting players, and even some veteran Texans, gravitated to his table. "I've never really seen that before," says O'Brien.

On the day of the draft Smith tried and failed

JONATHAN FERREY

WELCOME BACK . . .

ANDREW LUCK

"It's nice having a low point," says Luck, "because it means you're coming back up from that point." Here the Colts' QB—out since January 2017 with a shoulder injury—opens up about his pain and his doubts

Did you ever feel like you might not play again?

Certainly those were some thoughts you allow to creep in. Getting help—talking to guys that have had serious injuries—was a really positive thing for me. It's nice to talk to someone and realize, weird as it sounds, that you're not alone, that someone has done [this] before.

Do you appreciate what you have more now?

Oh, 100%. When it's been taken away from you, you're going to appreciate it more. Without sounding too cliché, there's a little bit of a new lease on life.

When did you eventually decide: I'm gonna be O.K.?

There was no epiphany. I didn't wake up one day and decide that. It was the little things, the cumulative effect, getting good help, having honest folks in and out of [our] building—I really am grateful for a number of folks who've been very patient with me. . . . When you're injured, you don't feel like you're on the team. You may wear a Colts shirt on the sideline, but it's an awkward reckoning. I was, in an odd way, embarrassed about it, shameful that I wasn't out there participating, helping. You do some weird things to your mind.

Yeah, what's your mood been?

The last couple of years I withdrew pretty significantly, within myself, emotionally. It wasn't a fun world to live in.

What needs to improve now that you're back?

Everything: Plays. Timing. Rhythm. My technique—I still don't have that where it's second nature. And that may take time. I'm not gonna kid myself. I certainly feel weathered, if that makes sense. I feel more mature, a little less naive. I feel a little less of a burden, in a general sense. I've always put a lot of pressure on myself. Sometimes, maybe that's not the healthiest thing to do. In a weird sense, I'm being nicer to myself.

You have to let go of the doubt now.

That is the hardest part. That first throw to the left side, plus-20 yards, at that angle—can I make it? Well, screw it. Gonna have to try. What's it going to feel like when I get hit? When I land? What I really wanna do is turn off the inner monologue of doubt and apprehension. By and large, I've been able to do that. . . . I didn't think I'd have this much fun playing football again. I've got a long way to go—a *long, long* way. But I believe that if we stay in this process, then I'll be O.K. We'll be O.K. —*Albert Breer*

to move up into the top 10. When the Chiefs snagged Mahomes with the 10th pick, the GM went to the phones again, figuring Watson would be the next passer selected. The QB, meanwhile, sat with Morris and Swinney in the green room in Philadelphia, fiddling with his phone while his old coaches stewed, Swinney asking no one in particular, "What are these people *thinking*?" Watson, Morris offered, was "going to get a lot of GMs fired."

Smith finally traded the No. 25 choice plus a first-rounder in 2018 to Cleveland. All these months later, he doesn't equivocate in justifying the price: Watson, he says, was "the single most exciting pick" in Texans history. "If I was going to miss on a guy. I would miss on *this* guy."

Swinney went on a Houston radio station and predicted Watson would win a Super Bowl "sooner rather than later." History would repeat; the QB would overcome any lingering doubts. He stands by that prediction, he says, before pausing, weighing what he wants to say next. Then he makes the same comparison that prompted all that ridicule in the first place: "Look. A lot of teams passed on Michael Jordan."

WELCOME BACK . . .

CARSON WENTZ [AND COMPANY]

The Eagles quarterback wasn't alone in missing Super Bowl LII—he had a whole club of co-rehabilitants

WHEN EAGLES quarterback Carson Wentz scrambled, dived for the end zone and had his left knee crushed on each side by a Rams tackler in Week 14 last year, Chris Maragos saw the hit and cringed. Then Wentz got up, hobbled to the huddle, took the next three snaps and capped off the drive with his 33rd touchdown pass of the season. Everything seemed fine.

Still, Maragos was sure there had been damage—and as he watched the game from his couch in Philadelphia, he was in a position to know. Wentz's shot looked just like the one that had torn Maragos's right ACL and PCL eight weeks earlier, ending his season.

Maragos's instincts were sadly correct. Wentz, the MVP front-runner, became the fourth Eagle to go down with an ACL injury in 2017, joining Maragos, left tackle Jason Peters and running back Darren Sproles in the trainer's room alongside middle linebacker Jordan Hicks (torn right Achilles). That's five team leaders sidelined in a span of 11 weeks. "I thought it was a bad dream," says Sproles, a 13-year veteran. "I was like, I don't know how we're going to finish the year."

Cut to footage of the Super Bowl LII parade.

Six months after the confetti fell, the Eagles have a clique of stars from different position groups, bound together by the unfortunate reality of rehab: straight leg raises, quad sets, prone hangs. . . . "We have been able to encourage each other and challenge each other," says Wentz. "None of us wanted to be here, but it helps that we are all in this together."

This offseason, the members of Club Rehab, as Hicks still calls it, reported for treatment at the NovaCare Complex around 8:30 a.m. every weekday, then typically lounged in the sauna or, depending on their progress, shot hoops after their workouts. The rest of the Eagles had scattered across the country in early February; all they had was one another.

Peters is known around Philly as the Bodyguard, but in Club Rehab he is the Godfather. "Whatever JP says, goes," explains Hicks. "I've been fined"—he drops air quotes around *fined*—"for being late. I wasn't actually *late*, but if you walk in after JP, you're late."

The Godfather's catchphrase in rehab: "Write 'em up!" If someone met Peters's definition of tardy or was slow to finish a workout, the 14-year veteran would scribble out a fine on a whiteboard, leaving a list of citations. (Mercifully, the Godfather never collected.)

As the group's de facto life coach—the one who "kept everybody up," in his words—Sproles had other means of motivating. "He'd let everybody know he's working harder than you; you need to step your game up," says Hicks. "Sproles would be finished with his workout around the time me and Chris were walking into the gym to start."

Maragos, aka DJ Gos, filled the room with a selection of early 2000s rap: Nelly, 50 Cent, Lil Jon, Big Tymers. Hicks was the grizzled rehab expert, having spent half of '15 on IR. And

MARAGOS SPROLES HICKS PETERS

BRYAN BULAGA | KYLE LONG | MALIK HOOKER | ALEX OKAFOR | CORDY GLENN

WATSON ANNOUNCED himself at his first rookie minicamp with a ball launched toward wideout Chris Thompson, a throw so deep and high and *pure* that the reactions to it can sound apocryphal: heads snapping back in wonder, eyes bugging out and so on. Afterward, Ryan asked Watson what the quarterback had noticed in the defense when he cocked back and unloaded. "I saw a flat-footed safety," Watson replied, "and I wasn't going to let him play that way." He adds now, "Honestly, it was just another throw."

No surprise, the same thing happened at Clemson in 2014: first scrimmage, hot route, deep throw, touchdown. Still, both Watson's college and NFL coaches chose another quarterback to start their respective season openers, meaning that even those closest to Watson, on some level, had doubted him.

The Tigers' staff had planned to play the freshman on the third series of their opener, at Georgia, in his home state, with all his family in the stands. Watson came in, recognized the one blitz his coaches had most worried about, checked the protection and led the team

Wentz was the youngblood who had to set his own pace. Early in rehab, when the second-year QB was mostly immobile, he hung out with Hicks and Maragos through their workouts. But then, says Hicks, "He was like, You guys are way too slow; you talk too much; I gotta get my work done."

Each new member of the ACL union had a recent rehabilitant to show him the way. After his surgery on Oct. 27, Peters could voice his anxieties to Sproles, who'd gone under the knife a week and a half earlier. Says Sproles, who had started his recovery in California, "I told [Jason], 'When you get your flexion back, everything else is easy. That's the hardest part.' "

A few weeks later the Godfather found himself guiding Maragos, 31, who had his operation on Nov. 8. "Jason would tell me, 'On Day 14 you're going to feel like this'—and then I would get to Day 14 and it would be exactly what he said," Maragos recalls. "He'd say, 'The surgical pain will be gone on this day'—and sure enough, I wake up the next day and the surgical pain is gone."

About a month after his surgery, Maragos became Wentz's ACL authority. Later, in June, the special teams stalwart was not cleared to participate in mini-camp, so he watched Wentz closely during individual and team drills and gave him feedback. "When I see him move around now," says Maragos, "I'm like, 'Hey, you're not favoring anything!' I tell him stuff as I see it because I know what he's feeling."

From California, Sproles recorded a video of his first attempt at running and texted it to the group. Maragos responded with a video of himself doing heel slides to break up scar tissue and regain flexibility. Says Sproles, "We were competing to see who could heal faster."

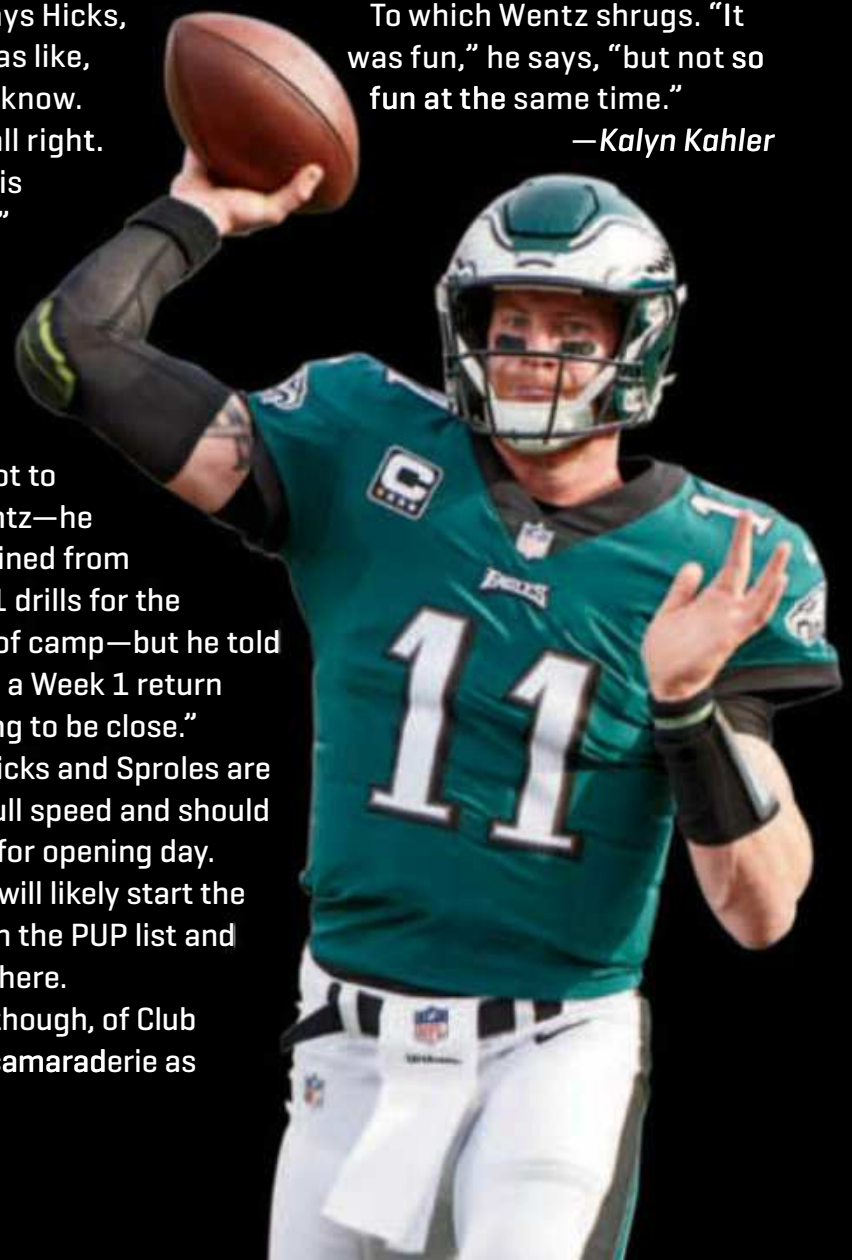
Club Rehab faced its toughest challenge at the Eagles' most joyous moment. At U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, the five members helped coach their respective position groups throughout the Super Bowl upset of the Patriots. But each time they finished giving notes, they'd find their way back to stand together along the sideline. "Sproles and I would give each other a little shake of the head," says Hicks, "and it was like, 'I know, I know. We'll be all right. Our time is coming.' "

That time is now. The Eagles are being careful not to push Wentz—he was sidelined from 11-on-11 drills for the majority of camp—but he told reporters a Week 1 return was "going to be close." Peters, Hicks and Sproles are back at full speed and should be ready for opening day. Maragos will likely start the season on the PUP list and go from there.

What, though, of Club Rehab's camaraderie as the walking wounded return to their position groups? Is there any separation anxiety? "Absolutely," says Maragos. "I'll see Carson and be like, 'Come on, man—let's work out together!' I'll see JP around and be like, 'I miss you, bro!' "

To which Wentz shrugs. "It was fun," he says, "but not so fun at the same time."

—Kalyn Kahler



FROM FAR LEFT: AL TIELEMANS/AP; ELSA/GETTY IMAGES; G. NORMAN LOWRANCE/AP; AL TIELEMANS/AP; ROBERT BECK

down the field. First drive, first touchdown. Two weeks later he outperformed starter Cole Stoudt and took the job. The next Saturday, against North Carolina, Watson threw for 435 yards and a school-record six touchdowns.

Three years later, O'Brien opened with Savage at home against the Jaguars, but he turned to Watson at halftime, down 19–0. On his first drive Watson led Houston to its only TD, on a four-yard pass to Hopkins. Afterward, Watson told Avery, "I'm the guy moving forward." Same as it ever was.

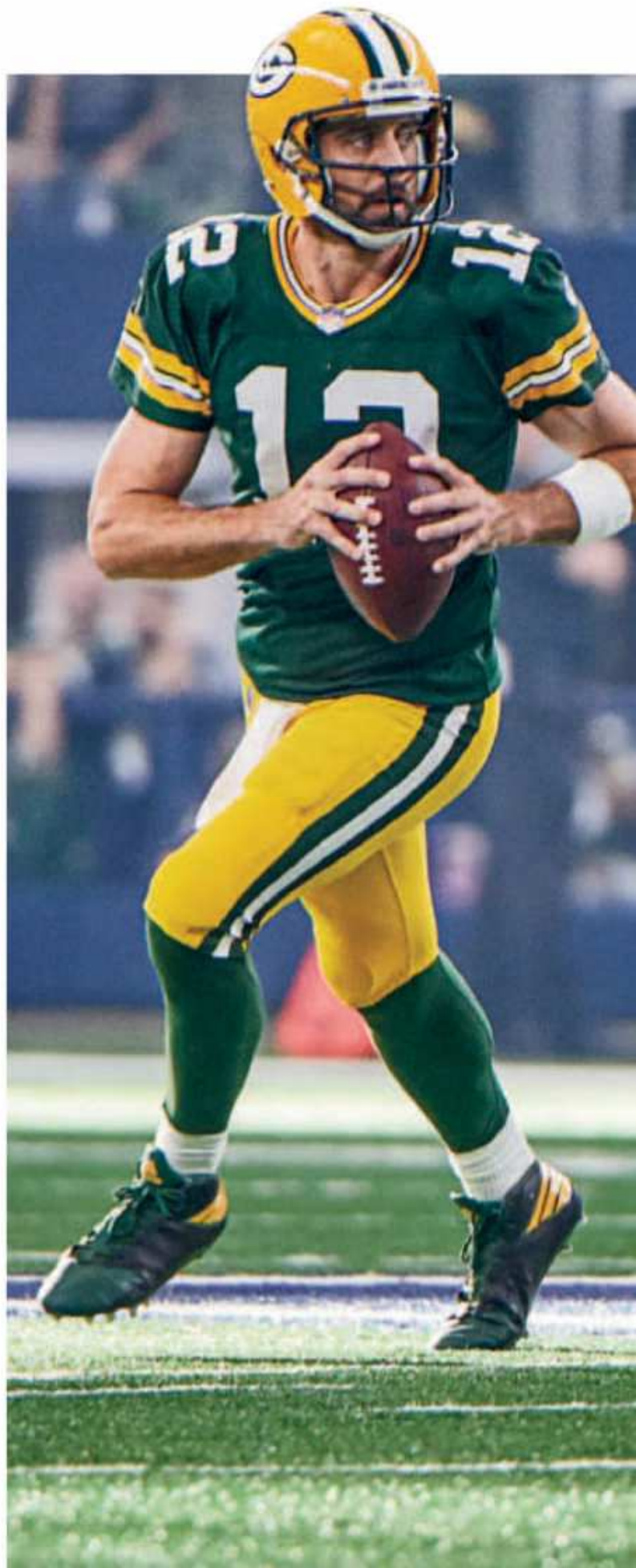
Months before that game, in the summer of 2017, Watson had attended a fund-raising event in Charlotte, where he spent an hour with Moon and Cam Newton. The Panthers' quarterback, Moon recalls, did most of the talking: He detailed what Watson could expect as a rookie, how the game is faster, the pressure higher and the rewards greater—if all falls right. It was almost funny, Moon says now, looking back at how right everything then fell.

Watson had three days to prepare for his first NFL start, against the Bengals on *Thursday Night Football*, on his 22nd birthday. The Texans went into that game without a single healthy tight end; they played backup tackles instead, severely limiting their passing attack. And Cincinnati shut Watson down—except for when he evaded three rushers, slipped through a pocket of four Keystone Kops defenders downfield and scooted into the end zone for a 49-yard score in the second quarter that proved the difference in a 13–9 win. It wasn't the prettiest performance (*Sometimes he'd throw that thing and hit the Gatorade cooler)* but Watson had scratched out a win. "Things like this just kind of happen," he says.

As things continued to happen—300 yards and two scores against the Patriots; four passing touchdowns and another on foot in a rout of the Titans; five TD throws against the Chiefs, three against the Browns, and then that game in Seattle—those closest to him pondered why anyone seemed surprised. He was doing what he'd always done. To him, it was to be expected. In fact, he crammed so many exploits into such a short stretch that O'Brien feels it necessary to temper expectations for 2018. "Look," he says, "he's only played seven games. We can do something here with this guy—but I don't want to crown anyone just yet."

There's plenty to consider crowning: the rookie-record 19 touchdowns to begin 2017, the 81.5 QBR and 7.5 yards per rush, each better than any passer with seven starts. Mike Devlin, Houston's offensive line coach, says Watson even improved that unit, with his mobility and decisiveness limiting sacks. "I knew I could do it," Watson says. "The Texans knew I could do it—that's why they drafted me. And teams that didn't know, they're aware now. They had their opportunities."

That Houston finished 4–12, winning just one of the 10 games that Watson didn't start, is very much beside the point. They survived a hurricane as well as a rash of injuries, to players like Watson, Watt and Mercilus. Last season will be remembered as the year



GREG NELSON

the franchise finally found its quarterback, a man who donated his first game check to three stadium employees displaced by Hurricane Harvey.

O'Brien ran into Swinney last spring at Clemson. "Boy, is he special or what?" the Texans' coach said to the guy who'd compared Houston's quarterback with Michael Jordan.

This time, Swinney just nodded.

> ***Smith called Watson the most exciting pick in Texans history: "If I was going to miss on a guy, I would miss on this guy."***

WELCOME BACK . . .

AARON RODGERS

Maybe some time without their star quarterback is just what the Packers needed (but they'll thank the football gods he decided to return)

BECAUSE HE'D been there before, Aaron Rodgers knew the question that would bubble up in his brain after he broke his right clavicle last October, costing him the back end of the season. And sure enough, just as in 2013 when he had the same injury, there it was: *Am I done playing?*

The idea of embarking on yet another NFL season is daunting enough at 34, but throw in a severe injury and it can be even harder to get the motor restarted. So Rodgers listened again to his body and to his mind—and it didn't take long for the forces within to offer the answer: *Let's do this again.*

"It was right away," says Rodgers. "When I see [retired Packer] James Jones standing on the sidelines today [at camp], as much as you think about the fun touchdowns, you think more about the times in the locker room, the road trips, the flights, the get-togethers, the team-building events. . . . That's what you will miss when you're done."

It's pretty clear too, what the Packers will miss when Rodgers is eventually done. Including the game in which Rodgers was hurt, Green Bay failed to top 20 points six times in the 10 games without him, and they twice put up goose eggs. By comparison, they scored less than 20 points just three times in the 21 games before his injury, and Rodgers has never been shut out as a starter.

As hard as that time without Rodgers was, though, players and coaches say the experience will strengthen them in the long run. "There's always a benefit to negative situations," says coach Mike McCarthy. "Adversity strikes. There's shock—but it's really what you do going *forward*."

The Packers finished 7–9 and out of the postseason, but in Rodgers's absence, receivers Davante Adams and Randall Cobb found their voices in the huddle; same for linemen David Bakhtiari, Bryan Bulaga and Corey Linsley. And rookie backs Aaron Jones and Jamaal Williams got to see the offense from a different perspective—one without Rodgers's arm taking pressure off the running game. The defense was challenged too: forced to play often without a lead and with shorter breaks as the offense struggled.

"It opens up eyes, showing people how valuable [Aaron] is," says Adams. "You see the leadership void in the locker room. Someone needs to step into that, whether it's one person with a big voice or younger guys stepping up and leading by example."

Now Rodgers returns with an enhanced appreciation for everyone around him—and everyone around him has a renewed appreciation for number 12. "You have 11 guys on the same page, not 10 guys leaning on one," says running back Ty Montgomery. "When he's as good as he is, when he does some of the stuff he does, it's just like: *Oh, well, it's all right. I didn't pick up my block, but he can throw the ball 50 yards while moving backwards and getting hit.* Now, everyone's level of play will be where it needs to be—whether he's in the game or not."

It has been more than eight years since Rodgers led a crew of young players he'd come up with in Green Bay to a victory over the Steelers in Super Bowl XLV. The hope now: That a young crew forced to grow up without him can get the Packers *back* to the Super Bowl. —A.B.

THE PASSERS who have defined this generation of football—Brady, Brees, Rodgers—are closer to the ends of their careers than to the beginnings, meaning there are a few coveted Face of the NFL spots to be seized. Avery thinks his trainee is poised to do just that. "He's going to win MVP, win a Super Bowl and change a franchise," he says. "Why? Because he *said* he will. It's like when he said he'd never lose to South Carolina in college [in 2014]—then he beat them *on a torn ACL*. He was like, 'I *said* I'm never going to lose to them!' " (About that: Watson went down on Nov. 15 that year, missed one game, then strapped on a brace and ran for two TDs in beating the Gamecocks. *Then* he had surgery.)

On this notion of succeeding Brady and the rest, Watson is a bit more tempered: "I wouldn't say all that this soon." *This soon*.

Same for O'Brien. He and his staff know that Year 2 can be the most difficult for NFL quarterbacks. Defenses, for starters, have more game tape, allowing them to tailor their schemes. (That's one place Watson's injury actually helps him: He's put fewer snaps on film.) But the Texans also know, already, that their QB can play at an MVP level. They know teammates are drawn to him (as are sports celebs, such as LeBron James and Aaron Judge, who have praised the way Watson plays). They know he rehabbed ahead of schedule, returned in time for limited spring practices and was cleared fully before training camp. What's possible? In a word, Ryan says: anything.

Moon, meanwhile, sees some of himself in Watson—in the big arm, restrained demeanor and status as Houston's football savior. "Fans have been waiting for so long there—waiting for another franchise, then for a quarterback," says the Hall of Famer. "He can put them on top."

It's June in Houston. Watson is doing a photo shoot, posing in a locker room, then outside in front of a green Dumpster on a typically humid afternoon. The heat seems to bother him more than any of these expectations. Same as it ever was. Stadium workers pass by and thank him for the magical stretch last season. Watson narrows his glare and the photographer asks for "more eyes."

Afterward, the QB thanks the guy behind the camera, his staff and what seems like everyone around the stadium. He then pivots into next season, into the Texans' facility, where at the doorway one of those workers is carting rubble toward a Dumpster and drops a long, skinny lightbulb at Watson's feet. It shatters, the sound echoing off the walls. Everyone gasps as Watson recognizes the danger and jumps backward, cleats clanking on the concrete.

Ultimately it's nothing, just a minor scare, and there's a collective sigh of relief for the franchise quarterback the Texans have been waiting for, who's ready again for history to repeat. □

WELCOME BACK. . .

J.J. WATT

Sushi rolls and sponge baths: an offseason with the Romeo and Juliet of recovery

ON THE EVE of his eighth NFL training camp, J.J. Watt opened a text message and got emotional. Attached was a cellphone video, filmed in a hospital 10 months earlier, in which the Texans' defensive end wore surgery socks, with a giant bandage around his left knee, as a physical therapist showed him how to take a single step forward.

"It's crazy when you look back at that," says Watt, who returned to the practice field on July 26 after fracturing his tibial plateau in a game last Oct. 8 and missing the last 12 weeks of 2017. The NFL Defensive Player of the Year in '12, '14 and '15 had not only broken a bone but also torn cartilage—the sort of injury doctors say they usually see with car accidents. Multiple surgeons had to put his leg back together with a metal plate and screws. "That day, you're thinking to yourself, How the hell am I ever going to get back to who I am?"

If anyone could understand that feeling, it was the person who recorded the video. Kealia Ohai was with Watt at the Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center last October when her boyfriend underwent surgery. And she knew the setting well. Ohai, the captain of the Houston Dash, a pro soccer team in the NWSL, had torn her

DAVID E. KLUTHO

left ACL and meniscus on the field three months earlier. One of Watt's surgeons had even operated on her.

For two months after his surgery, Watt couldn't walk, so he leaned on Ohai to assist with almost everything. She'd bring him a toothbrush and a bowl of water so he could brush his teeth sitting down. She mastered the art of sponge baths and took over the critical household chore of cooking chocolate chip pancakes.

At the same time, Ohai was in the most intense stage of her own rehab. Before she'd leave the home she shares with Watt for her four-to-five-hour physical therapy sessions, she would make sure Watt had his phone, food and water within arm's reach. When she came back, he'd be sitting in the same spot—it was too painful for him to move.

In so many ways, this was old hat. For most of the two-plus years Watt and Ohai have been dating, he's been rehabbing one serious injury or another. When Watt needed back surgery for a herniated disc in the summer of 2016, Ohai would carry his urine bottles from bed or from the couch to the toilet, where she'd dump them out for him. (And this after they'd been dating for only two months.) But this time was different: Now the heartbeats of two franchises were confronting feelings of anxiety, frustration and uncertainty *together*. "Neither of us could feel too sorry for ourselves," says Ohai, "because the other one was going through the exact same thing."

For instant pick-me-ups the couple relied on sushi rolls of yellowtail tuna and truffle vinaigrette from Kata Robata or Neapolitan pizza from Pizaro's; and to conquer the boredom they devoured episodes of *Peaky Blinders*, a British crime drama, on Netflix. Watt resumed walking on Nov. 28, ahead of his doctors' schedule; he vacationed in Italy and visited the Coliseum in January; and toward the end of winter he started playing backyard goalie for Ohai—as long as she kicked from at least 20 yards away, to soften the sting.

Ohai, a forward, got back on the field in April, 10 months after her tear, and last month she was called up to the U.S. women's national team's training camp, an opportunity she'd worried might disappear for good after she tore her knee. "That was cool for J.J. to see," she says. "I think that gives him hope and confidence that he's going to [come back strong] too. I truly believe he's going to have the best season of his career."

Before Watt left last month for training camp in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., he gave Ohai a handwritten note, thanking her for all her support. In return, she sent the 20-second-long video she'd been saving since October. And for Watt, watching the clip was like rewinding through the past 10 months.

"People say you're going to come out on the other side of an injury better," says Watt. "I always questioned that. But this one, I really do feel, when I look back at it all, I did come out better. She helped me through the struggle so I could see the beauty at the end."

—Jenny Vrentas

NFL
PREVIEW
2018

BY ANDY BENOIT | BY JEREMY ENECIO

HEY, QB

SCRAP THE SUPERMAN CAPE

(AND OTHER ADVICE FOR AVOIDING IR AT THE MOST DANGEROUS POSITION IN SPORTS)

IN WEEK 6 last year, facing an early second-and-nine in Minnesota, Aaron Rodgers took a quick three-step drop and spied no open receiver, so, as he had many—so, *so* many—times before, he fled the pocket. Scrambling right, the Packers' QB rescanned the field, threw to Martellus Bennett and was immediately driven into the ground by Vikings linebacker Anthony Barr. On impact, Rodgers's right collarbone fractured, shattering with it Green Bay's Super Bowl chances. That injury—plus the shoulder problems that sidelined Andrew Luck for all of 2017 . . . plus the freak ACL tears that shelved young stars Carson Wentz and Deshaun Watson . . . plus a long history of promising campaigns quashed by injuries to adventurous passers—provokes a complicated question: What goes into keeping an aggressive QB safe? The answer is, well, complicated.

WATSON, WENTZ, LUCK, RODGERS. . . . With pass rushers getting scarier every year, are we doomed to seeing our most promising (and adventurous) QBs invariably injured?

T.J. LANG » *Guard, Lions* » Linemen, we tend to be grumpy. When there's a clean pocket and a QB breaks out just to try to get a couple extra seconds, we're like, "Just stay in the pocket, man!" But you really only get upset when the play results in a sack.

KEN WHISENHUNT » *Offensive coordinator, Chargers* » Outside the pocket, in space, with the speed of defenders out there—taking a hit is obviously something that puts you at risk of being injured.

RANDY FICHTNER » *Offensive coordinator, Steelers* » With a sack, we can figure out a way to overcome that. We *can't* overcome a turnover. And we *can't* overcome our quarterback getting hurt.

HUE JACKSON » *Coach, Browns* » Your starter, he's like gold. You don't want that guy touched. It changes the dynamic of everything for your team.

JC TRETTER » *Center, Browns* » In Green Bay [where Tretter played from 2013 to '16], as linemen we had an Aaron Rodgers Rule: hold your blocks forever. There will be times where it's like, "Hey, this is a three-step drop-back [and the play is still going on]?" I just blocked for as long as I could. I never thought, "Well, the ball should be gone." There were times Aaron would come in the huddle and say, "Hey, right-side O-line: Make sure you get beat *inside* on this play—I'm rolling out right." That was a unique way to start my career, the way he would backyard football it. You're like, That's not a great look for *me*. . . . Then he rolls out and hits a crosser in the middle of the field, wide open. It's fun to play with him that way.

BRUCE ARIANS » *Retired coach, Cardinals* » A quarterback faces that moment of truth: Can I really make a play out of this? *Uhhh, no—get rid of it!* Either get out of bounds or throw it away. But don't take a hit.

FICHTNER » Get rid of the ball. I can't remember the last time Ben Roethlisberger [left the pocket and] lost a single yard taking a sack. He's gonna throw the ball away. That's being aware.

ARIANS » Early on [when Arians was Pittsburgh's offensive coordinator] he was "Big Ben." He had the Superman cape on, and he wasn't ever going to throw it away. He'll get rid of it quicker now because of his experience. It took a couple of ankle injuries for him to stop holding on to it so long. . . . But there's a fine line. You don't ever want him to totally give up that Superman cape. That's what makes him special. He was so different from Peyton Manning. Peyton had a clock in his head: 1, 2, 3—this ball's going *somewhere*. He couldn't run, so he knew he was going to throw. But Ben could knock guys down. He'd pump-fake them and make plays. Andrew Luck's the same.

ANDREW LUCK » *Quarterback, Colts* » I'd like to think I can continue to extend plays [coming off an 18-month shoulder injury], but I think it'd be foolish of me to not adjust certain things about running.

FRANK REICH » *Coach, Colts* » Luck can absolutely still extend plays. . . . He has elite athletic ability for the position, and his ability to extend within the pocket, that's a big part of it.

ARIANS » Andrew threw an interception [in 2012, when Arians coached the Colts], and then he went down and laid out the guy who intercepted it. And I told him, "We *never* tackle with our [throwing] shoulder." He said, "I throw the interception, I make the tackle." And I said, "No, you don't. Just *get down*. If you're the last line of defense, grab him by the face mask. I don't care."

MATTHEW STAFFORD » *Quarterback, Lions* / There's a time and a place for extending plays. When there's a guy [opening up] down the field and you have a chance to make a big play? Hold on to the ball a little bit longer. It's all in the context of the game. I'm not perfect at it. I've had my fair share of dings.

ARIANS » Sometimes you use your bravado as a young player to win over your locker room, show them you're tough. I think of Carson Wentz right away. Luck. You do some things in your first few years you probably wouldn't do in your fourth and fifth, when you have the

BEND GAME

Reich knows that Wentz, his old QB in Philly, has to kick his college habit of taking off running—or else.

STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES

respect of your locker room and don't have to prove to your teammates that you're tough anymore.

REICH » I certainly saw that with Carson [in Philly, where Reich coached the offense the last two seasons]. Especially his rookie year. A lot of these quarterbacks came from college offenses where they were runners as well—all of that spread-option stuff. They're fearless. You just can't do that in this league.

BILL LAZOR » *Offensive coordinator, Bengals* / As much as people talk about ideas from college slipping into the pros, I think these hits on the quarterback create a ceiling in the NFL for some of the college schemes. There are a handful of quarterbacks who you don't mind taking the hits. True runners. But for the majority of them, it's not worth it.

REICH » You show your young QB the film; you show him guys doing it the right way. And then you show him what happens when you *don't* do it the right way. You don't want them to be scared, but players in this league are faster and stronger. Extend plays enough times, you're going to get hurt. They just have to buy into that. Carson, he didn't buy into it right away. *I am who I am. . . . I can't promise you.* That kind of stuff. But as time goes on, he realized he has a responsibility to the team. I think [Luck] understands that now.

LUCK » It's situational. It's about understanding—and I do feel I've gotten better at this—that there's a difference between middle of the first quarter, second-and-eight, and fourth quarter, third-and-five.

> ***Sometimes you use your bravado as a young player to win over your locker room," says Arians. "I think of Carson Wentz right away.***

LAZOR » When these situations come up early in the game you have to think to yourself: There are going to be 65, maybe 70 more plays in this game.

STAFFORD » It's tough because at a certain point I want to prove myself to everybody in that locker room. I'll sacrifice for anybody in there. I still do that crap all the time. The first game of last year, Arizona, third down, long run—I got friggin' *blasted*. Coaches don't want to see it that much, but the guys appreciate it. There's a time and a place where you've got to do it.

ELI MANNING » *Quarterback, Giants »* There are a few times where it kind of pops in your head: Hey, maybe I can make this guy miss. In big games, you've got to make a guy miss, you've got to get first downs. But the hits aren't worth it. So a lot of it is sliding as a runner.

WHISENHUNT » It's amazing, some of the guys who don't know how to slide. You'd think I could just tell you, "Hey, *slide*," and you'd be able to do it. But there have been guys we have had to work with on that.

ANDY DALTON » *Quarterback, Bengals »* My first slide ever was pretty bad—I got caught between diving and sliding. Now, for the most part, I just slide. It's all about understanding *when* to slide. You don't want to slide late. Look at my first slide ever, in a preseason game, and where I'm at now. It's night and day.

Perhaps no active player has been at the center of these discussions more than Robert Griffin III, who stormed onto the scene as a dual-threat Redskins rookie in 2012 but who has played in only five games since '15 due in part to injuries and his dependence on running. The last time Griffin entered a season as a starter, for Jackson's '16 Browns, he fractured his shoulder on a hit against the Eagles in Week 1. On that play Griffin scrambled immediately upon hitting the top of his drop-back, before his receivers' routes could unfold.

JACKSON » You want a guy to understand: We're really trying to get you to *throw*, as opposed to *run*. He's a passer first. In that play [where Griffin was injured] we were losing; we were trying to make some plays downfield to come back. So you drop back and get a chance to escape—but you still must do everything you can to protect yourself.

ROBERT GRIFFIN III » *Quarterback, Ravens »* If you're surrounded by four or five guys, get down and protect yourself. But when you have a one-on-one, if you feel

like you can make the guy miss, go ahead and try to make him miss. I've done it where I've tried to just run through everybody, and that didn't work out. I've tried to just get down all the time, and that didn't work out. . . . The play I got hurt on, in Philly, I was running out of bounds. So I don't know what else I was supposed to do.

FICHTNER » This is the thing that separates Ben [Roethlisberger]. I know guys who can extend plays. But Ben extends to *throw the football*. A lot of guys extend to *potentially* throw, but they aren't capable of being accurate when that time comes.

ARIANS » The safest thing for a quarterback is knowing what the hell you're doing.

SEAN MCVAY » *Coach, Rams* **»** If you know the play and its intent—if you understand and own the play's mechanics—then you can solve the potential problems that can arise based on what a defense presents. You have a good chance of keeping yourself out of harm's way.

A perfect illustration of this: Giants tight end Evan Engram's 35-yard catch in Week 14 last season against Dallas. The Cowboys had called a disguised fire zone blitz on first-and-10 near midfield, an extremely uncommon tactic in that situation. Manning audibled Engram to a corner route.

BROWN OUT

RG3's run-first approach landed him on IR in '16, marking his fifth injury-related absence.

MANNING » We were supposed to get the running back to protect, but he didn't go over there. We'd checked the play knowing they were going to come with that blitz. Earlier in my career I wouldn't have seen the blitz, and I definitely wouldn't have had the nerve to suggest to our coaches beforehand, "We should put this play in, I think it will work against this blitz." I had a feeling Evan was going to be open. So I dropped back and threw it, and I kind of ducked a tackle [from the slot blitzer] so I didn't take a hit in the face.

That sense for throwing and then contorting his body to better absorb a hit is a big reason the Giants' quarterback has never missed a game due to injury.

MANNING » You just throw it and kind of continue to turn, so the defender gets a hit on your backside rather than right in the face or the chest. You're also falling away a little, so it's not as big of a hit—you're kind of going *with* the hit. That's instinct. It's not something I work on or practice.

DALTON » When someone is grabbing on to you, don't just stand there, try to get down. If you feel like you can get out of it, try. My first preseason game, Ndamukong Suh knocked my helmet off, slammed me down to the ground, got a 15-yard penalty and got fined a lot of money—all that stuff. That was kind of like, O.K., I've got to find a way to not let this happen.

WHISENHUNT » The No. 1 thing for a QB's safety is protecting *himself* in the pocket.

MCVAY » It's having a good feel for how to manipulate the way a rush lane plays out. To extend plays, everybody automatically thinks of Aaron Rodgers and Russell Wilson. But Tom Brady's as good as anyone because he knows how to slide within the pocket and buy time within the framework of the pass rush.

FICHTNER » One of the things you can do as a quarterback is manipulate guys downfield [with your body language and mechanics]. Move the pocket. Feel, step, slide, reset, get to the right spot in time and get the ball out.

STAFFORD » You try to find the safe spots. There should be a little dent in the pocket where you can hang out. The rest of it is very instinctual. You've got people at your feet. I feel like my feet come off the ground just as [I get hit]. I don't practice that ever. It's just instinct.

WHISENHUNT » Two things you work on are stepping up in the pocket and making sure you have *consistent*

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depth in the pocket, so your O-line knows where you are. For instance, if [the line is] setting the pocket at 9½ yards and the quarterback takes a seven-step drop and he's at 11 yards, he's going to get hit by the guy coming around the edge.

STAFFORD » Pocket movement is not learned off a piece of paper. It's learned by doing drills and by playing in games. And everybody does it differently. Philip Rivers does it differently than Carson Wentz. Aaron Rodgers does it differently than Tom Brady.

TRETTER » Aaron's going to step up, step out and step *back* up in a way that makes the defensive end rush back inside. He allows you to pin the defensive end inside.

JACKSON » It's really all about the protection. You must make sure their best rusher doesn't get to your guy. That's the goal at the end of the day, that you're able to stop the Von Millers or the Terrell Suggses of the world.

LAZOR » The hardest thing to do in the NFL is to build a passing game. The thing that comes along the *slowest* is the pass protection. The flip side: That's arguably the *most important* thing you do because it keeps your quarterback healthy.

NINE: RUN! RUN!

Coaches cringe, but Stafford rationalizes his dashes thusly: "The guys appreciate it."

REICH » This all starts with A-gaps [between the center and guard]. That's the shortest route to the quarterback. You start there and work your way out. You don't want anyone in the quarterback's face.

WHISENHUNT » The quarterback and center—those are the most important for the protection. That and everybody being on the same page. When you're not on the same page and a defender comes free, that's where the greatest risk of injury is.

TRETTER » [In Green Bay] Aaron and I would meet at some point every week—maybe you grab the guy during breakfast or something—and make sure we're on the same page on how we're going to pick up every blitz. If we're in, say, a five-man protection and the defense is bringing six, Aaron knows which defender we're going to turn loose.

WHISENHUNT » The second tier of quarterback safety is the receivers. Some teams try to protect everything, but others try to put it on the receiver and the quarterback to throw a hot route or sight adjust. A sight adjustment is essentially a hot route, but for outside receivers.

STAFFORD » The guys on the outside have to win their routes at the right depth and at the right timing—that's what goes into a productive passing game: We're getting the ball out, quarterback's getting hit as little as possible, and we're still able to push the ball down the field.

REICH » Especially early in the game, it's very important to get the ball out quick. Let the defense know that it's going to be a long day. Let them think: We can't get to him; they've got all this quick rhythm-type stuff. They start to panic a little, get discouraged. They lose a bit of their edge.

The theories for how to keep quarterbacks safe are boundless. They also come with an uncomfortable understanding that these things are not entirely in the user's hands. And it's not so much about avoiding injuries all together as it is about avoiding certain types of injuries.

MANNING » It's survival, trying to understand that over 16 weeks, you're going to take hits.

WHISENHUNT » Hits to the knees and hits to the heads—you don't have control over how that's going to go.

STAFFORD » There's a little luck in it all. I can play with a sprained ankle. But I can't play with a separated shoulder. □

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BOSE

BY GREG BISHOP | BY SIMON BRUTY

NFL PREVIEW 2018

SEAN MCVAY

BALANCING ACT

WORK-LIFE HARMONY? *HAH*. The NFL's youngest coach got here with a single-minded devotion to the game. Don't expect the Rams' savior to change anytime soon

SEAN MCVAY is, at 32, the youngest head coach in the NFL. He runs Hollywood's pro football team, a legitimate Super Bowl contender, and it might seem as if he has everything he ever wanted, years earlier than could reasonably have been expected. And yet on this May morning inside his windowless brick office at the Rams' facility in Thousand Oaks, Calif., he's worried about his . . . *work-life balance*?

That's how his mind works: He's constantly cycling through an endless array of potential improvements, which makes it difficult to find any sort of balance. But he's trying.

He reaches for proof of his efforts, grabbing a hardcover from his office book shelf—*Getting to Us: How Great Coaches Make Great Teams*—and opening to the first chapter, which details what Urban Meyer learned from his health-related leave of absence after Florida's 2009 season. McVay read that volume on a Hawaiian vacation this spring, his idea of a holiday being to fly to a tropical paradise with his girlfriend, model Veronika Khomyn, and then spend time reading up on how to do his job more effectively. Sitting poolside, he scribbled notes in the margins, noting the pitfalls he wanted to avoid, underlining passages he could apply to his team or to himself. Like this one: "[Meyer's] sabbatical taught him the importance of living a balanced life and conserving energy, which replenished his persistence."

In discussing his own work-life balance, McVay does not mention that he reported to the Rams' facility this morning at 5 a.m. That he then geeked out on film study for two hours. That he hasn't had time to tackle his to-do list: hang the picture leaning

The MMQB

up against the back wall, start an Instagram account, take up golf. . . . Balance remains elusive for the NFL's reigning Coach of the Year.

Really, though, he says, *he's trying*. Last season he changed his sleep schedule, attempting to carve out six hours of rest on each of the preceding three nights' games, compared with the four he gets the rest of the week. He has delegated more responsibility to his assistants, and he reads those self-improvement books. "Well, it *sounds* nice," says McVay's father, Tim, his skepticism poorly masked.

The image that the Rams' coach presents to the world—his hair spiked *just so*; his ever-present sunglasses; his "schmedium" shirts showing off baseball-sized biceps—can make him appear like the bro-iest of bro coaches, a millennial with a clipboard. But the real McVay more closely resembles Bill Belichick (an emotionless cyborg and football lifer who's more than twice McVay's age) than he does Justin Bieber (whose music—gird yourself—McVay admits he does not hate). The real McVay loves books. He loves drawing up offensive schemes. He loves *books about drawing up offensive schemes*. He'll return home from practice and barely notice the breathtaking view of Los Angeles spread below his Encino mansion. Instead, he'll retreat directly to his office for another hour of film study. Khomyn, he says, is understanding—but "she wants me to have a little bit more of a life."

About that. Hobbies? McVay likes to study coaches. "I'm a fan of coaching," he says with a straight face. He analyzes Gregg Popovich's sparring sessions with reporters, travels to Dodger Stadium to pick manager Dave Roberts's brain and spends his offseasons pestering everyone from Doc Rivers to Chip Kelly to Belichick himself. Then there's Brad Stevens. McVay looks at the 41-year-old Celtics coach the way fledgling quarterbacks view Tom Brady. "I have so much respect for him," McVay gushes. "I try to catch all his interviews. Learn a lot just watching him."

For McVay, balance is relative, of course. It's a topic worthy of examination, but only as it relates to achieving optimal job performance. It matters that he's thinking about balance now, before any kind of health crisis, before he even has a family of his own. He became the youngest head coach in modern NFL history by scrutinizing every facet of his life. "There are only a few guys

BORN TO COACH

McVay relishes teaching moments, like this one with Gurley, and laments the lack of practice time for NFL players.

I've ever met like that," says Rams left tackle Andrew Whitworth, who at 36 is four years older than his coach. "Sean and Nick Saban [who coached Whitworth at LSU]. Rare intensity. It's literally déjà vu for me."

In 2017, McVay's first season in charge of any team at any level, all of 14 years removed from quarterbacking his high school to the Georgia Class 4A state championship, he led the Rams to an 11–5 record, the NFC West title and the franchise's first playoff appearance since January '04. L.A. landed four additional Pro Bowlers this spring through free agency and trades, bettering its odds of winning Super Bowl LIII while also raising the (totally valid) question of whether another collection of discarded superstars might spectacularly combust.

Speaking of balance. . . .

IT'S 5 A.M. on another May morning, four months from the start of the season and seven hours before practice will begin. Jay-Z flows through the speakers inside the team's weight room—*Yes, sir, I'm cut from a different cloth*—as McVay enters, chest puffed, hair moussed, sauntering past a sign that reads EMBRACE THE SUCK.

Strength coach Ted Rath runs McVay through his daily 20-minute workout: squats and leg lifts and resistance band exercises, all done in circuits. Mid-plank, McVay asks Rath's advice on how best to reach certain players, and he laments the lack of practice time allowed in the NFL. "The biggest thing is losing the ability to coach," he grouses.

JOSH LEFKOWITZ/GETTY IMAGES

McVay, it seems, was born with that ability to coach. Tim McVay remembers his son's natural curiosity as a child, how he never stopped asking questions, especially about football. The boy idolized his grandfather, John McVay, who worked in the 49ers' front office for two decades overseeing a dynasty that won five Super Bowls. Even after Tim moved the family out of the Bay, to Atlanta, where he took a job managing a TV station, Sean would obsess over the game. When the 49ers visited Atlanta, he'd hang around the team at San Francisco's Saturday walk-through and sit in on meetings, peppering the likes of Jerry Rice, Ricky Watters and Steve Young with questions about schemes.

At Marist School, Sean asked his teammates to stay for extra film study, devoured books on leadership and quarterbacked the War Eagles to the 2003 state title running a read-option offense. (He even edged out Calvin Johnson—yes, *that* Calvin Johnson—for Georgia player of the year honors.) Then he accepted a scholarship to Miami (Ohio), a school he'd targeted for its reputation as the Cradle of Coaches, a place where the likes of Woody Hayes, Ara Parseghian and Bo Schembechler once roamed the sideline.

Shortly before graduation, in 2008, McVay scored an interview at the NFL scouting combine with Jon Gruden, the then 45-year-old coach of the Buccaneers. Sean asked one of his college teammates, Dante DiSabato, to drive him to Indianapolis. Afterward, McVay excitedly told his friend, "I think I nailed it." The duo splurged on a dinner at Mo's steak house, where they saw Jack Del Rio, Andy Reid and John Fox downing slabs of beef in the dining room. "One day you'll get there," DiSabato said. "I hope so," McVay responded.

McVay won the job (assistant receivers coach), wrote his friend a thank-you note and then started mimicking Gruden, friends say, in his mannerisms, speech patterns and predawn office hours. McVay would arrive at 4:30 a.m.—only to be greeted by the head coach, who'd ask, "Where the hell have you been?"

> ***"The game is changing," says Pleasant, "and I think Sean and this organization are a microcosm of what's going on."***

The Bucs fired Gruden that offseason, and McVay took refuge with the United Football League's Florida Tuskers, where he worked under Gruden's brother, Jay. He caught on with the Redskins in 2010 and began his unprecedented rise: from assistant tight ends coach ('10) to tight ends coach ('11–13) to offensive coordinator under Jay, who joined him in Washington in '14. That McVay took over play-calling duties in '16 from Jay, who's regarded around the league as a brilliant offensive strategist, was telling. The Rams' general manager, Les Snead, took notice of the spiky-haired savant.

The schemes McVay drew up in Washington, meanwhile, boosted the Redskins' offense to a No. 3 ranking, turning Kirk Cousins into a coveted passer—one who would later sign a free-agent deal with the Vikings guaranteeing him $84 million. (In his house McVay keeps a jersey the QB signed along with the inscription: I OWE YOU MY CAREER.) The young coordinator took on guys who were seen as injury-prone (tight end Jordan Reed), combustible (wideout DeSean Jackson) and overrated (Cousins), and he connected with them all.

Snead sniffed around, heard players describe the upstart coach as the best teacher they'd come across, and then hired him, replacing Jeff Fisher, with his annual sub-.500 record, and spawning what seemed like a million jokes and memes. *Sean McVay's "back in the day" was 2006. . . . The head coach gets carded first. . . .*

"People have it all wrong," says Aubrey Pleasant, who moved with McVay from Washington to be the Rams' cornerbacks coach and who now tears up talking about what McVay means to him. "They think coaches can only be successful if they've done this for the last 20 years. But the game is changing. I think Sean and this organization are a microcosm of what's going on. What matters is how you reach people, cultivate relationships."

BALANCING ACT

SEAN MCVAY

THAT BALANCE thing is still a work in progress. McVay settles into his desk chair before sunrise and spends the next *two hours* planning the afternoon practice. The rapper Post Malone plays on his office speakers as McVay scribbles notes on a legal pad. It's 6 a.m., and he's already jazzed about working with his new receiver, Brandin Cooks, who arrived in April from New England (along with a fourth-round pick, in exchange for first- and sixth-round selections). McVay cannot stop raving about Cooks, his speed and his ability to separate from defenders. A Patriots assistant, McVay says, told him Cooks didn't miss a single practice snap in 2017.

Now the coach is studying a mash-up of the wideout's highlights from this spring and from past seasons when he arrives at a recent practice rep in which Cooks shakes off cornerback Aqib Talib (fresh from Denver) for a long score. "That's the play he got popped on in the Super Bowl," McVay says, noting that Cooks left that game against the Eagles last February concussed, in the second quarter. That exact sequence comes on next: Cooks never sees Philadelphia safety Malcolm Jenkins coming. *Boom*. "That's a great one to teach off of," McVay says. "He just turned around too early. He showed it."

McVay pivots from that game and mentions that he met with Belichick this spring, pestering the Pats' czar with questions about offensive schemes. *Could you envision coaching an NFL team at 66, as Belichick will this season?* "No," he says. "I don't think I could make it."

But does McVay even believe that? Asked what he does outside of football, he says he's been watching *13 Reasons Why*, a drama about teenage suicide on Netflix—but it's giving him nightmares, cutting into his already-limited sleep. In the next breath he says, "You know what's *really* cool? Having a year of tape to pore over!"

The Rams that McVay inherited were an unequivocal mess, having finished 4–12 in 2016 after moving from St. Louis. They had a quarterback, Jared Goff, who looked like a bust in Year 1 and a running back, Todd Gurley, who'd regressed in Year 2. All that plus offensive-line woes, depth problems and cultural issues: They hadn't topped .500 in 14 years.

"You need to know how serious we are about football," McVay told his team in that first meeting. And then he

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

SCHEME WEAVER

McVay's inventive play-calling has turned Goff (16, with backup Sean Mannion) into a Pro Bowler.

proved it. He made Pleasant, his friend from the Redskins, interview *twice*. He blew up the offense, adding a wider range of plays to make his team less predictable. He and Snead added Whitworth and center John Sullivan through free agency to stabilize the line.

They stomped the Colts in Week 1, 46–9, and took six of the next eight, toppling the Cowboys and the Jaguars on the road and dropping a combined 114 points on the Cardinals, Giants and Texans. They crushed the division-rival Seahawks and wrapped up the NFC West title (and a 7–1 road record) with a Week 16 victory in Tennessee. Gurley ran for 13 touchdowns (first in the NFL), Goff passed for 28 (tied for fifth) and McVay's Rams outscored their opponents by 149 points, the offense climbing in one season from worst in the NFL to first, which no other team had ever done.

Even then, the thing McVay recalls most vividly from last season is a 26–13 loss to Atlanta in the wild-card round of the playoffs. "That still stings *bad*, man," he says. "I could think of about 15 calls I screwed up. Probably 30 calls that I'd like to have back. You get away from the run when [first-team All-Pro Todd Gurley] was playing really well. You get a little greedy. . . ."

Still, McVay completely changed the direction of an entire franchise. In one season. Goff says his coach's youth actually *helped* him relate to his players, the way

they tweaked game plans, for example, over text message. Even then: "We haven't done anything yet," the QB says. To which McVay answers, "I *love* to hear him say that."

This team looks and feels very different than it has in recent seasons. Just listen to equipment manager Adam Mirghanbari (Merg in these halls), a Rams fan so dedicated that he moved from St. Louis to Los Angeles with the team, leaving behind his pizza business to work the JUGS machine at practices. "My favorite player is Sean McVay," Merg says. "He's my everything."

ON THE night before the draft, back in April, Snead attended his team's party for the first time in years. In previous seasons he'd been working to trade up for cornerstones like Gurley and Goff, but in 2018 he didn't own a single pick in the first two rounds. So he decamped to Otium, a modern restaurant in downtown L.A. that serves funnel cake with foie gras; caviar; and escargot with bone marrow. Having valeted his car, he ducked under the velvet ropes to find the restaurant filled with the beautiful and the tanned. *This*, he said to himself, *is what football in Los Angeles should look like*.

Last season, though, was not enough, and so Snead—despite the turnaround, despite the return to relevance and the improved roster—sent a text to McVay in May: "You know what I love? 2017 is officially over. 2018's on."

"No doubt," McVay tapped back.

So started an offseason talent splurge that, Goff says, felt as if the Rams signed "somebody every day." Which is almost true. Coach and GM wanted to address their defensive backfield in particular, and Snead traded for the Chiefs' Marcus Peters (for a fourth-round pick this year and a second-round selection in '19) and Talib, from Denver (for this year's fifth). These moves allowed them to use the franchise tag on free safety LaMarcus Joyner, gifting 71-year-old defensive coordinator Wade Phillips one of the league's most talented secondaries.

McVay had noticed how Peters responded to his worst plays, and he loved that Phillips could vouch for Talib, whom he'd coached in Denver, as a positive influence on younger players. When the new charges arrived, McVay carved out extra time to spend with the corners, indoctrinating them to his philosophy. "He sits right behind me," Talib says. "And when I watch him, I see guys respond to him the way they responded to Bill [Belichick]," who Talib played for in New England.

Adding to that defensive repertoire, Snead also signed former Dolphins defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh, who Rath enjoyed training years ago in Detroit. If not for All-Pro defensive tackle Aaron Donald's training-camp holdout, it might have been the perfect offseason.

> **"You knew at some point you were going to hear the Eagles [comparison]," says Snead. He draws an even bolder analogy: to the Warriors.**

Snead sees his approach as less Hollywood, more pragmatic. "I wouldn't call this a splashy offseason," he says. "Heck, I wouldn't even call Sean a splashy hire."

But he can only downplay the Rams' offseason spending so much. The reality: That approach is not without risk. It's faintly reminiscent of the so-called Dream Team that Philadelphia assembled in 2011. That team finished 8–8, then 4–12. "You do see people get ahead of themselves," McVay admits. (Snead: "You *knew* at some point you were going to hear the Eagles thing.") But coach and GM don't see their roster that way. In fact, the comparison they choose is much loftier: They point to the NBA's latest dynasty, the Warriors.

No, they're not suggesting they have quite that level of talent, hands down more than anyone else in the league. They're saying only that teams can collect superstars—adding someone like Kevin Durant, the second-best player in the NBA—and still win. Says Snead, "We've seen the Warriors embrace that."

The GM does not expect his young coach to find the balance he seeks this season. ("What do you want him to do? Watch something on Netflix?") But he does expect their young team to keep improving as the Rams' new 70,000-seat, $3 billion home nears completion. (Los Angeles Stadium at Hollywood Park is scheduled to open in 2020.) He expects to see more MCVAY IS THE WAY T-shirts around town. He thinks the 32-year-old could be the most celebrated coach in L.A. since Pat Riley was slicking his hair back for the Showtime-era Lakers.

It could happen.

But what if it all comes down to a choice? What would McVay pick: Better balance; a long and healthy life? Or a Super Bowl ring, with no balance? The coach makes a face as if that's the dumbest question in history, as if the answer should be obvious.

"Super Bowl," he says, laughing. "Wouldn't even have to think about it." □

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

NFL PREVIEW 2018

One thing is predictable in the NFL: The season will be unpredictable. Just ask the reigning Super Bowl champs. (SI saw Philly going 8–8 this time last year.) We asked **Andy Benoit** to forecast the 2018 season anyway.

× The NFC will be stronger at the top and deeper than the AFC. Take the Lions, my NFC No. 7 seed. In the AFC I'd have them as a 3 or a 4.

× All five first-round rookie QBs—Baker Mayfield (Browns), Sam Darnold (Jets), Josh Allen (Bills), Josh Rosen (Cardinals) and Lamar Jackson (Ravens)—will take over before the season ends. Especially with the CBA limiting practice time, there just aren't enough reps for young passers to develop from the bench. Through 2017, 24 of the last 27 first-round QBs became their team's starter as a rookie. The trend will continue.

× One glaring weakness can keep an otherwise playoff-caliber team home in January. For the Cowboys, that will be receiver and tight end. For the Giants, depth on offense. For the Panthers, run blocking. The Niners? Their secondary.

× The L.A. teams are trendy Super Bowl picks, but they aren't without flaws. The Rams' lack of edge rushers and linebackers will hurt. The Chargers' run D is overly reliant on rookies.

× The hype around Deshaun Watson is justified. But expect some sophomore growing pains. Watson spent the offseason rehabbing his torn ACL and he doesn't yet have a sense for what risks are worth taking. Texans fans should be much more excited about the future than the present.

× Run-pass options (RPOs) were the most-studied tactic by coaches this

SCOUT

The MMQB

TEAM BREAKDOWNS
BY ANDY BENOIT

FALCON CREST

It's time: Atlanta, losers in the franchise's two previous Super Bowls, will see Ryan raise the Lombardi at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

offseason, and they'll surge in 2018. But the revolution is bigger than just RPOs. More and more, offenses are designing plays to manipulate unblocked defenders: jet sweeps, fake reverse action, misdirection screens and multi-option zone reads all accomplish this. The five teams that do that best: Eagles, Patriots, Chiefs, Saints and Rams. All except the Chiefs are Super Bowl contenders.

× . . . And yet I'm picking the Falcons to be the first team to play (and win) a Super Bowl at home. Atlanta has a diverse, electrifying offense quarterbacked by 2016 MVP Matt Ryan. They also have a fast, unified defense built around guys in their prime. In the AFC, the Patriots feel a touch weaker this year. And so I'm giving that conference to the Steelers, who can win with a smashmouth ground game or a high-flying spread passing game. They, too, have a defense in its prime. But the Falcons are a more complete team. Atlanta finally gets its Lombardi Trophy. □

TNS REPORTS

KEVIN LILES

PROJECTED 2018 STANDINGS & POSTSEASON

AFC

EAST		SOUTH	
PATRIOTS 1	12–4	JAGUARS 4	10–6
JETS 6	9–7	TEXANS 5	9–7
DOLPHINS	7–9	TITANS	8–8
BILLS	4–12	COLTS	5–11
NORTH		**WEST**	
STEELERS 2	11–5	CHARGERS 3	10–6
RAVENS	7–9	BRONCOS	8–8
BROWNS	4–12	CHIEFS	7–9
BENGALS	4–12	RAIDERS	5–11

WILD CARD
3 CHARGERS *over* JETS 6
4 JAGUARS *over* TEXANS 5

DIVISIONAL ROUND
1 PATRIOTS *over* JAGUARS 4
2 STEELERS *over* CHARGERS 3

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
2 STEELERS *over* PATRIOTS 1

NFC

EAST		SOUTH	
EAGLES 3	11–5	FALCONS 1	12–4
GIANTS	8–8	SAINTS 6	11–5
COWBOYS	8–8	PANTHERS	7–9
REDSKINS	5–11	BUCCANEERS	5–11
NORTH		**WEST**	
PACKERS 2	11–5	RAMS 4	10–6
VIKINGS 5	11–5	49ERS	9–7
LIONS	10–6	SEAHAWKS	7–9
BEARS	7–9	CARDINALS	4–12

WILD CARD
6 SAINTS *over* EAGLES 3
5 VIKINGS *over* RAMS 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND
1 FALCONS *over* SAINTS 6
5 VIKINGS *over* PACKERS 2

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
1 FALCONS *over* VIKINGS 5

AFC Seed
NFC Seed

SUPER BOWL LIII

Feb. 3, 2019 Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta

1 FALCONS *over* STEELERS 2

AFC EAST

NEW ENGLAND »

2017 RECORD 13W 3L | 12W 4L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

PATRIOTS

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th TEXANS	4th COLTS	4th PACKERS	2nd VIKINGS
16th @JAGUARS	14th CHIEFS	11th @TITANS	9th @DOLPHINS
23rd @LIONS	21st @BEARS	18th BYE	16th @STEELERS
30th DOLPHINS	29th @BILLS	25th @JETS	23rd BILLS
			30th JETS

■ Monday ■ Thursday

»WELCOME BACK: Quick-strike passing game. Last season, with burner Brandin Cooks aboard and slot receiver extraordinaire **JULIAN EDELMAN** out with a torn ACL, the Patriots went deep more than they had in years. Though the results were sensational—**TOM BRADY**'s film was even better than his MVP stats suggest—the 41-year-old is at risk when he holds the ball on longer-developing vertical plays. Now Edelman is healthy (though he will be serving a four-game PED suspension) and Cooks is gone, shipped to the Rams for a first-round pick that the team used on Georgia lineman **ISAIAH WYNN**. (Wynn, who had been on track for a starting job, will miss the season after tearing his Achilles in a preseason game.) Expect the Patriots to return to the quick-strike option routes that have defined their passing game for much of the 2010s.

× An underrated aspect of the Pats' attack is its backfield screen game. Coordinator **JOSH MCDANIELS** dips into it every week. Brady shows great patience in these plays, and running backs **JAMES WHITE** and **REX BURKHEAD**, who can catch balls from anywhere in the formation, are very proficient here.

× New England has the consummate bend-but-don't-break defense. It ranked 29th in yards allowed last year but fifth in points. (Favorable field position provided by New England's offense and special teams also helped.) That won't change this year, in large part because the Patriots have weak edge rushers. Second-year men **DEATRICH WISE** and **DEREK RIVERS** need to emerge; if they don't, the four-man rush is a **TREY FLOWERS** injury away from utter ineptitude.

× Perhaps in response to the pass rush's limitations, New England last year dropped at least eight men in coverage an NFL-high 23.7% of the time, according to Football Outsiders. The Pats play seven defensive backs more than any team. That's why their depth and versatility at safety is invaluable. Starters **DEVIN MCCOURTY** and **PATRICK CHUNG** can match up with both backs and tight ends. **DURON HARMON** almost always locks down centerfield. And though he struggled in Super Bowl LII, fourth-year strong safety **JORDAN RICHARDS** can contribute against the run and the pass.

CHRIS SZAGOLA/CSM/SHUTTERSTOCK (MCCOURTY); ERICK W. RASCO (BRADY)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
1	15	10	17	21	23
		Strength			

× **THEIR OUTSIDE** receivers are not especially talented, but the Patriots are better than any team at using formations to create favorable matchups for their formidable inside weapons, **JULIAN EDELMAN** and **ROB GRONKOWSKI**.

AFC EAST

NEW YORK JETS

2017 RECORD 5W 11L | 9W 7L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

»WELCOME BACK: Jets defensive backfield star power, which went underwater with Revis Island. But it's about to resurface with 6-foot, 215-pound **JAMAL ADAMS**, who could be a first-team All-Pro this year. The No. 6 pick out of LSU in 2017 is dynamic and springy, and he finds ways to be near the ball. He can do everything you'd ask of a safety.

× In his fourth season at the helm, **TODD BOWLES** can finally be comfortable uncorking the disguised pressure packages that shot him to the top of head coaching search lists when he was the Cardinals' defensive coordinator. Bowles's blitzes, like most, require man coverage. Former Cowboy **MORRIS CLAIBORNE** was surprisingly serviceable as a No. 1 corner last year, but the DBs behind him were suspect. This offseason New York spent $45 million in guaranteed money on Rams free agent **TRUMAINE JOHNSON**, a bona fide No. 1 stopper. If capable slot corner **BUSTER SKRINE** becomes more consistent, Bowles could really unleash second-year safeties Adams and **MARCUS MAYE**, and that alone could mean a few more wins.

× With their talent on the defensive line the Jets should do better against the run than last year, when they finished 15th in yards allowed per attempt. **LEONARD WILLIAMS** has rare nimbleness for a 302-pound end. Nosetackle **STEVE MCLENDON** is a true interior plugger. Newcomer **HENRY ANDERSON** was quietly stout for the Colts last year.

× It's impossible to predict when QB **SAM DARNOLD**, the No. 3 pick in April, will start, but the Jets don't have to rush him, because **JOSH MCCOWN** is a pro's pro. He runs an offense the way it's designed, and that's what most coaches want more than anything. When the rookie's time comes, coordinator **JEREMY BATES** needs to get him on the move and outside the pocket, where Darnold was at his best at USC.

× The Jets have gone six seasons without a tight end having 500-plus receiving yards. (Dustin Keller had 815 in 2011.) This year New York's options at TE are '17 fifth-round pick **JORDAN LEGGETT**, '18 fourth-rounder **CHRIS HERNDON**, and former Raider **CLIVE WALFORD**, and it's all but a lock that this streak will continue. This greatly limits the flexibility of their offense.

AL PEREIRA/GETTY IMAGES (WILLIAMS); AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES (ADAMS)

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
10th @LIONS	7th BRONCOS	4th @DOLPHINS	2nd @TITANS
16th DOLPHINS	14th COLTS	11th BILLS	9th @BILLS
20th @BROWNS	21st VIKINGS	18th BYE	15th TEXANS
30th @JAGUARS	28th @BEARS	25th PATRIOTS	23rd PACKERS
			30th @PATRIOTS

■ Monday ■ Thursday ■ Saturday

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
25	27	25	22	28 Weakness	6

× **THE JETS** have talent inside, but this unit is ranked so low because it lacks quality edge rushers; their top returning sacker is **DAVID BASS**, who had 3½ in 2017. To compensate, coach **TODD BOWLES** will have to use a blitz-intensive approach.

AFC EAST

MIAMI »

2017 RECORD 6W 10L

7W 9L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

DOLPHINS

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th TITANS	7th @BENGALS	4th JETS	2nd BILLS
16th @JETS	14th BEARS	11th @PACKERS	9th PATRIOTS
23rd RAIDERS	21st LIONS	18th BYE	16th @VIKINGS
30th @PATRIOTS	25th @TEXANS	25th @COLTS	23rd JAGUARS
			30th @BILLS

■ *Thursday* ■ *Flex/Saturday*

»WELCOME BACK: The tight end threat. Coach **ADAM GASE** hasn't had a quality pass-catching tight end since Julius Thomas in Denver, and that has hindered his "speed trips" designs, in which all three wideouts line up on one side and the tight end on the other. That's why the Dolphins used a second-round pick on 6' 6", 249-pound Penn State tight end **MIKE GESICKI**. If he delivers on his promise as a receiver, Miami's wideouts will become much more dangerous—especially **KENNY STILLS**, who's lethal on deep shots out of the slot closest to the quarterback.

× The Dolphins' biggest problem last year was that Gase couldn't trust his offensive line. Every third-and-long became a check-down drill. Quick screens to receivers were too frequent and predictable. The ground game was an afterthought. Dumping center Mike Pouncey and guard Jermon Bushrod and adding replacements **DANIEL KILGORE** and guard **JOSH SITTON** will make the front five less athletic but more reliable. But the big improvement will come when young tackles **LAREMY TUNSIL** and **JA'WUAN JAMES** start playing up to their physical abilities.

× Even with questions along the offensive line, it's important that Gase not abandon his running game. Quarterback **RYAN TANNEHILL**, who is returning after missing all of 2017 with a torn ACL is his left knee, is more effective in a complementary role. And the Dolphins' backs can make plays in Gase's outside zone scheme. Third-year pro **KENYAN DRAKE** flashed outstanding improvisational ability late last season, and no one in the 2010s has been better at maximizing his blocks than **FRANK GORE**, the 35-year-old free-agent pickup from Indianapolis.

× Shedding Ndamukong Suh (who signed with the Rams) helps the salary cap but hurts the defensive line. With no overpowering tackle, veteran edge rushers **ROBERT QUINN** (acquired from the Rams) and **CAMERON WAKE** (still flourishing at 36) will have a harder time closing the pocket. It helps, though, that backup ends **ANDRE BRANCH** and **CHARLES HARRIS** can also play inside. That can expand the designer four-man rushes Miami will need for generating pressure.

CHRIS TROTMAN/GETTY IMAGES (DRAKE); KOHJIRO KINNO (GESICKI)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
29	19	13	24	20	20
		Strength			

× **MIAMI ESSENTIALLY** swapped out Jarvis Landry, now with Cleveland, for free agents **DANNY AMENDOLA** and **ALBERT WILSON**—a loss in talent but an upgrade in reliability. Coach **ADAM GASE** wants receivers who get to their spots on time.

AFC EAST

BUFFALO »

2017 RECORD 9W 7L

4W 12L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

BILLS

»WELCOME BACK: STAR LOTULELEI. The $24.7 million free-agent defensive tackle is new to Buffalo but not to coach **SEAN MCDERMOTT**, who was his coordinator for four seasons with the Panthers. The 6' 2", 315-pound Lotulelei will pair with **KYLE WILLIAMS**, perhaps football's craftiest run-stopping lineman, to form a formidable interior front that should ease the burden on 20-year-old **TREMAINE EDMUNDS**, the 16th pick from Virginia Tech, who must lead a linebacker corps made up of lower-drafted youngsters and journeymen.

× Defensive end **JERRY HUGHES** is the only Bills pass rusher who can consistently disrupt the quarterback, so McDermott must keep applying pressure through scheme.

× Three players are key to Buffalo's coverage changeups: safety **MICAH HYDE**, a sound, opportunistic pass defender who can operate anywhere from the slot to centerfield; free safety **JORDAN POYER**, who can toggle between different alignments; and cornerback **TRE'DAVIOUS WHITE**, a rising star who understands zone techniques at left corner and can travel with top receivers in man-to-man. **VONTAE DAVIS**, signed from the Colts, also stabilizes the No. 2 corner spot, leaving nickel slot as the secondary's only area of concern.

× Even before quarterback **A.J. MCCARRON,** who couldn't supplant a mediocre Andy Dalton in Cincinnati, recently broke his collarbone, he was unlikely to keep first-round pick **JOSH ALLEN** off the field for long. Allen is big, mobile, strong-armed and sometimes wildly inaccurate. He's similar to Cam Newton, the QB McDermott and GM Brandon Beane know well from their years in Carolina.

× It might be next year before coordinator **BRIAN DABOLL** can implement all major aspects of his offense. Not only are the Bills inexperienced at QB, but they're also weak up front. Last year's O-line lacked athleticism, and now its two best players, left guard Richie Incognito and center Eric Wood, have been replaced by men who'd be backups on most teams—**VLADIMIR DUCASSE** at guard and either **RUSSELL BODINE** or **RYAN GROY** at center.

DAMIAN STROHMEYER/AP (WHITE); G. NEWMAN LOWRANCE/AP (LOTULELEI)

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @RAVENS	7th TITANS	4TH BEARS	2nd @DOLPHINS
16th CHARGERS	14th @TEXANS	11th @JETS	9th JETS
23rd @VIKINGS	21st @COLTS	18th BYE	16th LIONS
30th @PACKERS	29th PATRIOTS	25th JAGUARS	23rd @PATRIOTS
■ Monday			30th DOLPHINS

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
32	7 Strength	24	32	31	19

× **AT AGE 30** the super agile **LESEAN MCCOY** shows no signs of decline. Now the Bills have a nice complement of backups in thumper **CHRIS IVORY**, signed from Jacksonville, and 2017 midseason pickup **TRAVARIS CADET**, a versatile pass catcher.

AFC NORTH

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

2017 RECORD 13W 3L | 11W 5L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @BROWNS	7th FALCONS	4th @RAVENS	2nd CHARGERS
16th CHIEFS	14th @BENGALS	8th PANTHERS	9th @RAIDERS
24th @BUCS	21st BYE	18th @JAGUARS	16th PATRIOTS
30th RAVENS	28th BROWNS	25th @BROWNS	23rd @SAINTS
			30th BENGALS

■ Monday ■ Thursday

»WELCOME BACK: Pittsburgh's pass rush. The Steelers had an NFL-best 56 sacks last year, up from 38 in 2016. They deploy a trove of creative blitzes featuring slot corner **MIKE HILTON** and powerful inside linebacker **VINCE WILLIAMS**, but they use them selectively. In fact, 39 of their sacks came off a four-man rush. Tackles **STEPHON TUITT** and **JAVON HARGRAVE** are powerful 300-plus pounders who move as if they weigh 250. Eighth-year end **CAMERON HEYWARD** combines near-perfect technique with outstanding strength and quickness. Outside, **T.J. WATT** showed bendability as a rookie and also a knack for using his hands.

× Because we've long been enamored with the way he sheds would-be sackers and extends plays, we overlook **BEN ROETHLISBERGER**'s amazing arm. His accuracy is among the best ever—and that includes when he's under duress. His precise ball placement enables **ANTONIO BROWN** to make so many tough catches against dedicated double teams. Big Ben's other overlooked trait: his high presnap IQ, which allows him to trigger a potent quick-strike passing game out of spread formations.

× The rushing scheme brilliantly capitalizes on **LE'VEON BELL**'s patient running style. Right guard **DAVID DECASTRO** and center **MAURKICE POUNCEY** are football's most mobile interior blocking tandem (except for Zack Martin and Travis Frederick of the Cowboys, *maybe*). Pittsburgh maximizes that mobility on slower-developing plays that give Bell time to read the D. On inside runs the Steelers almost always use double-team blocks. That patience pays off; the longer the run takes, the longer 600 pounds of offensive linemen can push around a 300-pound defender.

× The surprising first-round selection of Virginia Tech safety **TERRELL EDMUNDS** suggests the Steelers plan to join the growing number of defenses that play primarily with three safeties. Either Edmunds or free-agent pickup **MORGAN BURNETT** will move to stack linebacker (where Burnett played with the Packers in 2016). Third-year DB **SEAN DAVIS**, who is better than Pittsburgh fans think, moves to free safety.

JUSTIN BERL/GETTY IMAGES (BROWN); GEORGE GOJKOVICH/GETTY IMAGES (TUITT)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
4	4	3	3	8	14
					Strength

× **THIS COULD** develop into a top 10 unit. At corner **ARTIE BURNS** is improving, **JOE HADEN** went unchallenged by QBs in several games last year, and slot man **MIKE HILTON** is a top blitzer. **SEAN DAVIS** should thrive at his new free safety spot.

AFC NORTH

BALTIMORE »

2017 RECORD 9W 7L | 7W 9L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

RAVENS

»WELCOME BACK: Smashmouth offense. The Ravens must be a run-first team in 2018. QB **JOE FLACCO** is faltering, the receiving corps is mediocre and the line is unathletic. The ground game better suits the Ravens because run-blocking is a proactive movement, whereas pass-blocking is reactive. Offensive coordinator **MARTY MORNHINWEG** and run-game coordinator **GREG ROMAN** must be creative in structuring double-team blocks and using tight ends and H-backs as blockers. Tailback **ALEX COLLINS** can cover for some of the weaknesses; he fights for yardage and uses his surprisingly light feet to create space.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th BILLS	7th @BROWNS	4th STEELERS	2nd @FALCONS
13th @BENGALS	14th @TITANS	11th BYE	9th @CHIEFS
23rd BRONCOS	21st SAINTS	18th BENGALS	16th BUCS
30th @STEELERS	28th @PANTHERS	25th RAIDERS	23rd @CHARGERS
			30th BROWNS

■ *Thursday* ■ *Flex/Saturday*

× The mobility of first-round pick **LAMAR JACKSON** can amplify a rushing attack, and this staff is led by men who have had success with running quarterbacks: Roman with the 49ers in 2012, when Colin Kaepernick reached the Super Bowl, and Mornhinweg and new QB coach **JAMES URBAN** with the Eagles in '10, when Michael Vick nearly won MVP. A change under center and an accompanying shift in style seem inevitable.

× Baltimore played with two tight ends more than any team last season. Expect that to continue with their drafting of **HAYDEN HURST** in the first round and **MARK ANDREWS** in the third. The receiving corps has been modestly upgraded but not sufficiently reconstructed. **MICHAEL CRABTREE** is the new Jeremy Maclin, **JOHN BROWN** is the new Mike Wallace and **WILLIE SNEAD** is the new Michael Campanaro. (**BRESHAD PERRIMAN**, the team's first-round pick from 2015, will presumably be the same invisible Breshad Perriman.)

× When you ask NFL coaches which defense they least like facing, the Ravens always comes up, for two reasons: their front seven can stop the run, and their third-down blitz packages are creative. With **ERIC WEDDLE** and **TONY JEFFERSON** as safeties, new coordinator **DON MARTINDALE** will disguise blitzes and coverages as much as predecessor Dean Pees. Weddle, 33, may be the NFL's saviest DB, while Jefferson can match up with tight ends and patrol in space. As a box defender he's more dangerous than any safety, except maybe the Giants' Landon Collins.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (JACKSON); BEN LIEBENBERG/AP (COLLINS)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
23	21	30	27	7	7
		Weakness			

× **IF NEWCOMER MICHAEL CRABTREE** can rediscover the sharp route running and sticky hands he displayed earlier in his career in San Francisco and in Oakland, then Baltimore's passing game might have a chance.

AFC NORTH

CLEVELAND BROWNS

2017 RECORD 0W 16L

4W 12L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th STEELERS	7th RAVENS	4th CHIEFS	2nd @TEXANS
16th @SAINTS	14th CHARGERS	11th FALCONS	9th PANTHERS
20th JETS	21st @BUCS	18th BYE	15th @BROWNS
30th @RAIDERS	28th @STEELERS	25th @BENGALS	23rd BENGALS
			30th @RAVENS

■ Thursday ■ Saturday

»WELCOME BACK: Shutdown cornerbacking. The Browns haven't had that kind of corner since **JOE HADEN** was at his best in 2014, and they need one. No team blitzed or disguised coverages more often than Cleveland last year. Corners who can handle receivers one-on-one free up a defender for coordinator **GREGG WILLIAMS**'s aggressive designs, which explains the selection of Ohio State cornerback **DENZEL WARD** at No. 4.

× **TYROD TAYLOR** was a caretaker quarterback in Buffalo who moved the chains with his legs and on well-crafted play-action rollouts. He left throws on the field, though, and struggled with accuracy. But coach **HUE JACKSON**, having gone 1–31 in Cleveland, wants to start winning as soon as possible, which is why he's giving the experienced Taylor the early nod over No. 1 pick **BAKER MAYFIELD**. Jackson wants the best chance for victory in Week 1.

× Last year Jackson simplified his designs, perhaps because he had so little talent at wide receiver. That situation has improved with the acquisition from Miami of Pro Bowl slot receiver **JARVIS LANDRY**. There's not much depth behind Landry, but if **JOSH GORDON**, who has had multiple suspensions for drug violations, is available, that will help the cause greatly.

× Defensive coordinator Williams walks a fine line between outsmarting opponents and outsmarting his own players, and the latter happened too often last year. He should consider cutting pages from his playbook and simplifying for the sake of his inexperienced charges.

× Williams asks his safeties, **DAMARIOUS RANDALL** and **JABRILL PEPPERS**, to line up deep, 18 to 22 yards off the ball. This allows them to play downhill. The danger is that it opens up more space for offenses to attack with digs and seam routes, which killed the Browns last year. For the scheme to work, Cleveland's four-man rush will have to apply more pressure. That starts with **MYLES GARRETT**, the No. 1 pick last year. Garrett has the multidirectional burst and violent hands to become the league's most explosive interior attacker, from both the defensive end and tackle positions.

NICK CAMMETT/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (GARRETT); DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (WARD)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
31	14	21	19	30	24
				Weakness	

× **THE BROWNS** have one of the fastest linebacking groups in football, featuring **JAMIE COLLINS**, **JOE SCHOBERT**, **CHRISTIAN KIRKSEY** and free-agent signee **MYCHAL KENDRICKS**. They just need a few more disruptive pass rushers to play behind.

AFC NORTH

CINCINNATI BENGALS

2017 RECORD 7W 9L

4W 12L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

»WELCOME BACK: ANDY DALTON . . . but in a "we didn't expect to see you here again" sort of way. The Bengals could have released their so-so quarterback this spring, taken only a minor cap hit ($2.4 million) and become players in an offseason QB market rich with first-round prospects and starting-caliber free agents, but they chose to bring him back for an eighth season. He doesn't move well in the pocket, which creates issues with his mechanics and downfield vision. Cincinnati reached the playoffs in each of his first five seasons, but the nine-loss campaigns of 2016 and '17 are more indicative of where this team and QB are at.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @COLTS	7th DOLPHINS	4th BYE	2nd BRONCOS
13th RAVENS	14th STEELERS	11th SAINTS	9th @CHARGERS
23rd @PANTHERS	21st @CHIEFS	18th @RAVENS	16th RAIDERS
30th @FALCONS	28th BUCS	25th BROWNS	23rd @BROWNS
			30th @STEELERS

■ *Thursday*

× If second-year pro **JOE MIXON** becomes more decisive at the point of attack, he can be one of the league's five best running backs. The most important physical trait for an NFL rusher is lateral agility—the ability to move east and west within confined areas. That's how he sets up blocks, makes defenders miss and creates space. Mixon's lateral agility is in the class of Le'Veon Bell's and David Johnson's, but erratic run blocking prevented him from showing it off last year.

× To improve its blocking, Cincy upgraded at left tackle (trading for the Bills' **CORDY GLENN**) and at center (drafting Ohio State's **BILLY PRICE** with the 21st pick). While that will help, guards **CLINT BOLING** and **TREY HOPKINS** remain a significant concern.

× **A.J. GREEN**'s chemistry with Dalton remains iffy, even after seven years together. Since 2011 (including playoff games), 41 passes to Green have been intercepted, the most of any receiver. He isn't responsible for all—or even many—of these, but this offense can't succeed if targets to its No. 1 receiver don't become more reliable.

× The Bengals' D gave up just one run of 30 yards or more last season, yet still allowed 127.9 rushing yards a game, third most in the NFL. That and a measly 14 forced turnovers (tied for second fewest in the league) are signs that the line doesn't gain penetration and disrupt offenses. Defensive tackle **GENO ATKINS** is a force, but new coordinator **TERYL AUSTIN** needs someone else in the rotation up front to create a jolt.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (2)

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
27	13	15	30	29	10
			Weakness		

× **CLINT BOLING, CHRISTIAN WESTERMAN** and **TREY HOPKINS**, contenders to start at guard, would be backups on most teams. Weak guards are hard to hide, and a problem for a 6' 2" QB like **ANDY DALTON**, who struggles with pocket movement.

AFC SOUTH

JACKSONVILLE »

2017 RECORD 10W 6L

10W 6L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

JAGUARS

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @GIANTS	7th @CHIEFS	4th BYE	2nd COLTS
16th PATRIOTS	14th @COWBOYS	11th @COLTS	6th @TITANS
23rd TITANS	21st TEXANS	18th STEELERS	16th REDSKINS
30th JETS	28th EAGLES	25th @BILLS	23rd @DOLPHINS
			30th @TEXANS

■ Thursday ■ In London
■ Flex/Saturday

»WELCOME BACK: Winning game managers. It's unusual these days for a conservative-style QB to take his team to the conference title game, but **BLAKE BORTLES** did it last season. Bortles, 26, is better than his critics claim, though his flaws are real. His motion is slow and clunky, and his release point is low, so accuracy can be an issue. But Bortles's good moments can be great. He throws with velocity. He makes plays with his legs. In 2017 he was able to execute a well-designed passing attack that built off Jacksonville's power running game.

× Running back **LEONARD FOURNETTE**'s rookie season revealed room for maturation (as a runner and a professional), but he's the right type of bull for coach **DOUG MARRONE** and VP of football operations Tom Coughlin. No player finishes runs more authoritatively than the 6-foot, 228-pound Fournette.

× What the Jaguars' ground game lacked in 2017 was a road-grading offensive line. They addressed that by signing former Panthers guard **ANDREW NORWELL**. Alongside Norwell is left tackle **CAM ROBINSON**, a tantalizing '17 second-rounder who, unlike most young linemen, is better in pass protection than run-blocking. If he can take advantage of his steady footwork and long arms in the ground game, the O-line will be much more imposing.

× Jacksonville's star-studded defense had been inconsistent against the run, but after trading for Bills tackle **MARCELL DAREUS** in Week 8, it went from allowing 138.6 rushing yards a game to 98.8. Capable of lining up at nosetackle or 3-technique, Dareus creates more options for deploying monster run stoppers **CALAIS CAMPBELL** and **MALIK JACKSON**.

× Your best chance at beating the Jags' D is on north-and-south designs up the middle, where blanket corners **JALEN RAMSEY** and **A.J. BOUYE** are less of a factor. Linebackers **MYLES JACK** and especially **TEVIN SMITH** are too fast to challenge east and west, but because they chase downhill so well, they tend to set up deep. If an offense is willing, it can dink-and-dunk, which also negates Jacksonville's potent pass rush.

SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES (2)

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
26	12	26	14	2	2
					Strength

× **WITH THE** talent outside (**JALEN RAMSEY** and **A.J. BOUYE**) and at safety (**BARRY CHURCH** and **TASHAUN GIPSON**), you could argue this unit should be No. 1. But new slot corner **D.J. HAYDEN** is a downgrade from Aaron Colvin, who signed with Houston.

AFC SOUTH

HOUSTON »

2017 RECORD 4W 12L

9W 7L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

TEXANS

»WELCOME BACK: DESHAUN WATSON. It's hard to imagine a rookie QB and a coach synching as quickly as Watson and **BILL O'BRIEN** did last year. O'Brien shrewdly replaced many of the complex option routes from his playbook with misdirection concepts that highlighted Watson's mobility. Watson, in turn, committed more each week to playing from the pocket—which is essential for long-term NFL success. Watson does not have a cannon, but he compensates with decisiveness; he's also comfortable making throws on the move and outside the pocket. The only concern is Watson's appetite for risk. In seven games he threw eight interceptions, and he could have easily had 14.

× Having speedy receivers such as **WILL FULLER** (who missed six games last season with a broken collarbone and cracked ribs) and fourth-round rookie **KEKE COUTEE** can change Watson's world. Not only are more downfield throws available, but also safeties won't be able to focus as much on **DEANDRE HOPKINS**, football's most befuddling star receiver. He's not especially fast, quick, big or refined, and yet his production is almost unmatched. No one is better at making contested catches.

× After losing **WHITNEY MERCILUS** and **J.J. WATT** to injury in Week 5 last year, Houston allowed a league-worst 29.0 points per game from that point on. Without them, the Texans couldn't maximize the versatility of their trademark diamond front, in which five players set up across the line, dictating one-on-one matchups. Mercilus should be ready to go after coming off a torn left pec. Watt, the two-time Defensive Player of the Year, is more of a question, having missed most of 2017 with a tibial plateau fracture in his left leg, and 13 games in '16 with a back injury.

× Creative pass rush designs are key to getting the most out of **JADEVEON CLOWNEY**. Though perhaps the game's most destructive run defender, he does not have the flexibility to consistently bend around the edge when going after the quarterback. His deceptive, herky-jerky movement can still generate outside pressure, but he's most dangerous inside, where he relies on upfield burst.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @PATRIOTS	7th COWBOYS	4th @BRONCOS	2nd BROWNS
16th @TITANS	14th BILLS	11th BYE	9th COLTS
23rd GIANTS	21st @JAGUARS	18th @REDSKINS	15th @JETS
30th @COLTS	25th DOLPHINS	26th TITANS	23rd @EAGLES
			30th JAGUARS

■ Monday ■ Thursday ■ Saturday

ZACH BOLINGER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (CLOWNEY); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (WATSON)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
14	28	16	31 Weakness	6	17

× **UNLESS HE** made huge strides over the summer, **JULIE'N DAVENPORT**, a 2017 fourth-round pick, is not ready to start at left tackle. The other four spots aren't in great shape either, meaning backs and tight ends will have to stay in to block.

AFC SOUTH

TENNESSEE TITANS »

2017 RECORD 9W 7L

8W 8L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @DOLPHINS	7th @BILLS	5th @COWBOYS	2nd JETS
16th TEXANS	14th RAVENS	11th PATRIOTS	6th JAGUARS
23rd @JAGUARS	21st @CHARGERS	18th @COLTS	16th @GIANTS
30th EAGLES	28th BYE	26th @TEXANS	23rd REDSKINS
			30th COLTS

■ Monday ■ Thursday
■ Flex/Saturday ■ In London

»WELCOME BACK: A stingy defense. It's been 10 years since Tennessee had a top 10 D, but this edition has a chance to be formidable. **MALCOLM BUTLER**, signed from New England, joins **LOGAN RYAN** and **ADOREE' JACKSON** to give new coach **MIKE VRABEL** perhaps the NFL's best cornerbacking trio. All three can play true solo coverage, with Ryan and Jackson capable of doing so from the slot. With these matchup corners, the Titans can deploy safeties and linebackers on blitzes—which Vrabel and coordinator **DEAN PEES**, formerly of the Ravens, love to do.

× Free safety **KEVIN BYARD** had two fumble recoveries and a league-high eight interceptions last year. But the All-Pro is more than just a turnover creator. Byard is an excellent run-filler and blitzer, and he can cover tight ends. If he continues to develop, he will be a consensus top five safety by the end of the season.

× The Titans should be judicious in using **MARCUS MARIOTA** as a runner. He's not like Cam Newton, who can take the pounding, or like Russell Wilson, who has incredible vision when plays break down and is brilliant when throwing on the move. Mariota is a timing-and-rhythm quarterback whose best chance is from the pocket. That's why his passer rating on play-action last year was a league-high 122.8.

× After Mariota, wide receiver **COREY DAVIS**, last year's No. 5 pick, is Tennessee's most important offensive player. If Davis, who missed five games because of a hamstring injury, doesn't become a viable perimeter threat, this attack, which lacks speed, will struggle in passing situations.

× The O-line returns, but beyond Pro Bowl left tackle **TAYLOR LEWAN**, this unit has issues. Right tackle **JACK CONKLIN** suffered an ACL injury in his left knee in January and was already an inconsistent pass blocker. The interior group—**QUINTON SPAIN**, **BEN JONES** and **JOSH KLINE**—didn't move defenders well in 2017. A schematic change might help. New coordinator **MATT LAFLEUR** prefers outside zone runs, with east-to-west movement. His predecessor, Mike Mularkey, ran more inside zone, gap scheme and split zone, all of which are north-and-south designs.

ERICK W. RASCO (MARIOTA); MARK HUMPHREY/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (BUTLER)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
24	20	31 Weakness	20	19	4

× **THE VALUE** of **DELANIE WALKER** has never been higher. With so little speed in their wide receiver group, the Titans will lean more heavily than ever on the 13th-year tight end, who can be moved around the formation to create mismatches.

AFC SOUTH

INDIANAPOLIS »

2017 RECORD 4W 12L

5W 11L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

COLTS

»WELCOME BACK: ANDREW LUCK. If he wants to stay back, though, he needs to change his style of play. Luck is outstanding at prolonging plays from within the pocket, but doing so leaves him susceptible to hits. After recovering for 18 months from a right shoulder injury, he needs to protect himself. While the deep-dropback passing game that new coach **FRANK REICH** helped the Eagles run last year would seem ideal for Luck, Reich should consider more of the three- and five-step dropback scheme that Philadelphia used in Carson Wentz's rookie year. Luck could thrive in that setup because he excels at presnap reads. The only question would be whether he is patient enough to stick to a dink-and-dunk approach.

× Can Indianapolis's O-line, bolstered by the selections of guard **QUINTON NELSON** (the sixth pick) and guard **BRADEN SMITH** (37th), lead a rushing attack as successful as the one Reich had in Philly? The Colts have an intriguing headliner in second-year back **MARLON MACK**, who has the kind of agility and turbo power that keeps defensive coordinators up at night. Late in his rookie year Mack also showed a knack for setting up and hugging blocks, a skill that he picked up from the now-departed Frank Gore.

× **T.Y. HILTON** is one of the league's five most electrifying deep threats, but he's not a true No. 1 receiver for one reason: He struggles against press coverage. While Antonio Brown, for example, can align anywhere in a formation, including on an island out wide, Hilton often has to set up inside the painted numbers or go in motion—tactics that force corners to play with a cushion.

× There's no point in assessing Indy's defense too deeply. It's so unknown and so thin at so many positions that new coordinator **MATT EBERFLUS**, hired from Dallas, will likely be toying with personnel into December. You'll see plenty of stunts, twists and D-line slants because Eberflus believes such ploys can mask front-four weakness. The only surefire nickel contributor is second-year free safety **MALIK HOOKER**—and that assessment may be optimistic, considering that he went on injured reserve seven games into 2017 with a right knee injury.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th BENGALS	4th @PATRIOTS	4th BYE	2nd @JAGUARS
16th @REDSKINS	14th @JETS	11th JAGUARS	9th @TEXANS
23rd @EAGLES	21st BILLS	18th TITANS	16th COWBOYS
30th TEXANS	28th @RAIDERS	25th DOLPHINS	23rd GIANTS
			30th @TITANS

■ Thursday
■ Flex/Saturday

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
9	32	12	21	32	32
		Strength			

× **THE DEPTH** behind wideouts **T.Y. HILTON** and **RYAN GRANT** is poor, but the hope is that tight ends **JACK DOYLE** and **ERIC EBRON** can compensate. Doyle is a flexible, short-area chess piece. Ebron can split out and run receiver-type routes.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IAMGES (MACK); DAVID E. KLUTHO (LUCK)

AFC WEST

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

2017 RECORD 9W 7L | 10W 6L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
9th CHIEFS	7th RAIDERS	4th @SEAHAWKS	2nd @STEELERS
16th @BILLS	14th @BROWNS	11th @RAIDERS	9th BENGALS
23rd @RAMS	21st TITANS	18th BRONCOS	13th @CHIEFS
30th 49ERS	28th BYE	25th CARDINALS	23rd RAVENS
			30th @BRONCOS

■ Thursday ■ Flex/Saturday ■ In London

»WELCOME BACK: Major talent at safety. The Chargers were weakened at this position two years ago when Eric Weddle left in free agency, but they selected Florida State's **DERWIN JAMES** 17th overall to come to the rescue. Addressing safety affects more than one position, because a general softness up the middle affected the entire L.A. defense, including what should be a major strength, their pass rush.

× **JOEY BOSA** and **MELVIN INGRAM** are one of the league's most electric pass rushing tandems, but their attack suffered late last year when they had to play more conservatively to help a run defense that ranked 32nd in yards per attempt. Chargers GM Tom Telesco addressed that deficiency by drafting not only James but also linebacker **UCHENNA NWOSU** in the second round and tackle **JUSTIN JONES** in the third. All three are potential starters who could redefine the middle of the L.A.defense.

× The Chargers finished 2017 first in total passing for three reasons: 1) **PHILIP RIVERS**, 36, is a bona fide field general who shows no sign of decline; 2) **KEENAN ALLEN** became a true No. 1 receiver, displaying unmatched route-running mechanics, particularly on in-breakers; and 3) offensive coordinator **KEN WHISENHUNT**'s scheme, which is sophisticated in disguising its intentions. With a receiving corps that includes Allen, a healthy **MIKE WILLIAMS** (the seventh pick in the 2017 draft) and downfield weapons **TYRELL WILLIAMS** and **TRAVIS BENJAMIN**, L.A. should again have one of the league's most effective passing games.

× To become a Super Bowl contender the Chargers must improve a rushing attack that ranked 24th last season. **MELVIN GORDON** needs a scheme that defines his point of attack. Second-year coach **ANTHONY LYNN** over the years has employed "gap scheme" runs that feature pull-blockers and man-to-man blockers. Gordon has shown he can thrive in such plays, which will help forge L.A.'s identity on the ground. New addition **MIKE POUNCEY**, signed from Miami, can help with the athleticism he supplies at center.

KEVIN TERRELL/AP (BOSA); BEN LIEBENBERG/AP (JAMES)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
5 Strength	17	8	13	13	13

× **WHEN HIS** career comes to an end, the Hall of Fame debate regarding **PHILIP RIVERS** will be fascinating. He has the gaudy stats but not the playoff success—at least not yet. Among people in football, though, his skills are held in the highest regard.

AFC WEST

DENVER »

2017 RECORD 5W 11L

8W 8L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

BRONCOS

»WELCOME BACK: BILL MUSGRAVE. In 2016 he coordinated a young Raiders offense to 12 wins, superbly blending the running and passing games, yet Oakland didn't re-sign him at season's end. So Musgrave moved to Denver, where he spent a frustrating 2017 season coaching QBs before being promoted to coordinator in December. In '18 he has a chance to fully implement his system with the Broncos. He begins with a viable veteran QB in **CASE KEENUM**. The 30-year-old free-agent pickup from Minnesota has playmaking flair but so-so physical tools; he must be helped by the type of run-pass balance that Musgrave struck in Oakland.

× If Keenum is to build on his 2017 success, Denver's O-line must play better. Last year it was embarrassed by gap-shooting 4–3 defenses like Philadelphia's and Miami's. The Broncos bring back mostly the same front five this season, but with ex-Cardinal **JARED VELDHEER** acquired to halt what had been a turnstile at right tackle. At left tackle, 2017 first-round pick **GARRETT BOLLES** needs to strengthen his pass-blocking.

× Fullback **ANDY JANOVICH** should be playing at least 25% of the snaps. Not only can he be a productive lead blocker for **DEVONTAE BOOKER** and third-round rookie thumper **ROYCE FREEMAN**, but his mere presence will force defenses to pay more attention to the run.

× Denver's defense might not be as talented or experienced as it was in its 2015 Super Bowl season, but it's still one of the best because it has what every team covets: elite edge rushers (**VON MILLER**, rookie **BRADLEY CHUBB, SHANE RAY** and **SHAQ BARRETT**) and cover corners (**CHRIS HARRIS** and **BRADLEY ROBY**). Harris might be the league's most valuable defensive back. He can play man or zone, out wide or in the slot. He matches up against big tight ends or speedy receivers.

× This defense has struggled in coverage out of base 4–3 and 3–4 personnel, in part because linebacker **TODD DAVIS**, though a stout run stopper, is less effective in space. Expect more three-safety packages from coordinator **JOE WOODS**.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th SEAHAWKS	1st CHIEFS	4th TEXANS	2nd @BENGALS
16th RAIDERS	7th @JETS	11th BYE	9th @49ERS
23rd @RAVENS	14th RAMS	18th @CHARGERS	15th @BROWNS
■ Monday	18th @CARDINALS	25th STEELERS	24th @RAIDERS
■ Thursday	28th @CHIEFS		30th CHARGERS
■ Saturday			

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
18	30	22 Weakness	25	5	11

× **DEMARYIUS THOMAS** and **EMMANUEL SANDERS** can still be a potent one-two punch, but who will emerge as that crucial third option? Can second-round rookie wideout **COURTLAND SUTTON** from SMU get up to speed that quickly?

RIC TAPIA/AP (HARRIS); ANDY CROSS/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES (KEENUM)

AFC WEST

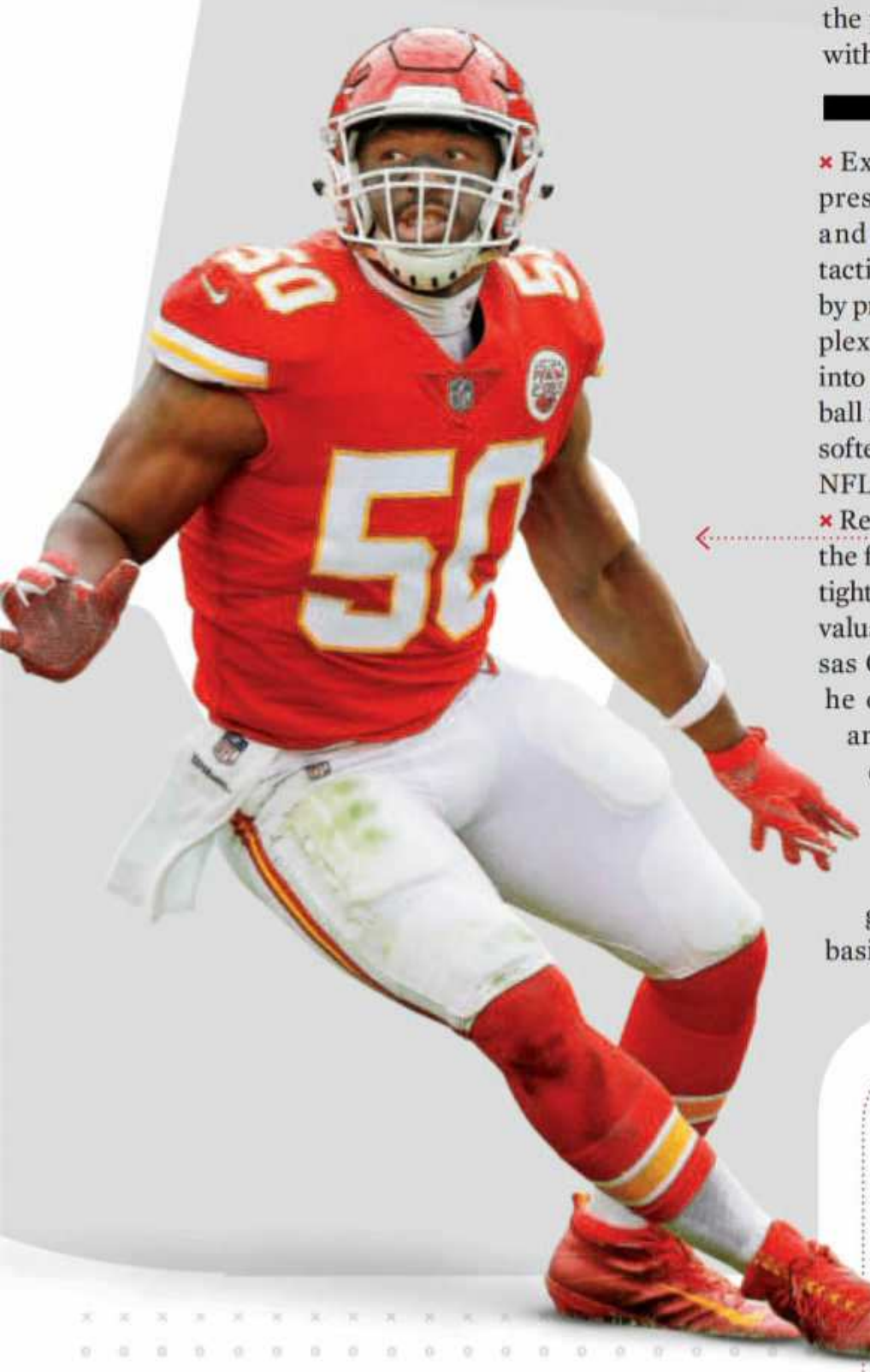
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

2017 RECORD 10W 6L | 7W 9L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @CHARGERS	1st @BRONCOS	4th @BROWNS	2nd RAIDERS
16th @STEELERS	7th JAGUARS	11th CARDINALS	9th RAVENS
23rd 49ERS	14th @PATRIOTS	19th @RAMS	13th CHARGERS
	21st BENGALS	25th BYE	23rd @SEAHAWKS
	28th BRONCOS		30th @RAIDERS

■ *Monday* ■ *Thursday* ■ *In Mexico City*



»WELCOME BACK: ANDY REID, the gunslinger-friendly version. Before taking over in Philadelphia and Kansas City, Reid was an assistant in Green Bay, where his job, in part, was to keep QB Brett Favre under control. Favre's choices often aged his coaches in dog years, but he made more than enough positive plays to compensate. Reid, after starting ball-protecting Alex Smith (the anti-Favre) for his first five years with the Chiefs, is ready to take a walk on the wild side, placing the passing game in the hands of **PATRICK MAHOMES**, 22, who thrived with an unstructured attack at Texas Tech.

× Expect Reid to still feature presnap motion, misdirection and multioption reads. Those tactics put a defense on its heels by presenting the illusion of complexity, but they can transition into traditional concepts once the ball is snapped. It's a great way to soften a young QB's transition to NFL starter.

× Receiver **TYREEK HILL** might be the fastest player in football, but tight end **TRAVIS KELCE** is the most valuable nonquarterback on Kansas City's offense. As a receiver he can beat not just safeties and linebackers but also most cornerbacks, and from almost anywhere in the formation.

× Last year the Chiefs had the NFL's most-efficient ground game on a per-carry basis. They also averaged 141.2 rushing yards in wins and 81.8 in defeats—a difference that was greater than the NFL average by half. With an offense that includes an inexperienced QB and the defending rushing champ, **KAREEM HUNT**, Reid would be wise to run the ball more frequently.

× No defender is better at setting the edge and then making the stop than **JUSTIN HOUSTON**. The outside linebacker can also drop into coverage, though you could argue that coordinator **BOB SUTTON** asks him to do so too often. Last season, according to Football Outsiders, the Chiefs rushed three and dropped eight 21.8% of the time, second only to the Patriots. Houston still had 9½ sacks, but with his talent that number should be in the mid-teens.

PETER READ MILLER/AP (HOUSTON); SCOTT WINTERS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MAHOMES)

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
30	9	1	11	26	26
	Strength				

× KAREEM HUNT runs with excellent balance and vision, and he proved as a third-round rookie that he can contribute in the passing game as well. Backups **SPENCER WARE** and especially **DAMIEN WILLIAMS** are also good receivers out of the backfield.

AFC WEST

OAKLAND RAIDERS

2017 RECORD 6W 10L

5W 11L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

»WELCOME BACK: The direct snap? **JON GRUDEN** prefers the traditional under-center exchange because it synchronizes the timing in his West Coast offense. But QB **DEREK CARR** has taken most of his snaps in the shotgun, which became prevalent around the time Gruden left coaching for broadcasting, in 2009. Still, with minor adjustments Gruden could run much of his offense out of the gun. Will he tweak his approach, or will he force the 27-year-old Carr to adjust?

× Replacing Michael Crabtree with **JORDY NELSON** at receiver is an upgrade in maturity, but if Gruden doesn't call plays that spring Nelson open through design, the former Packer will struggle. At age 33 and with his injury history, Nelson no longer has the great speed, burst or change of direction. He can be effective from the slot, where he won't face press coverage. The problem is, Gruden might want to shift **AMARI COOPER** there, given how he dominates on clean routes but flounders against perimeter press corners.

× **MARSHAWN LYNCH** is still a tenacious runner at 32, and he knows how to set up blocks inside. Guards **KELECHI OSEMELE** and **GABE JACKSON** and center **RODNEY HUDSON** form one of the NFL's best interior O-lines. Gruden must commit to the ground game more than former play-caller Todd Downing did in 2017.

× Last season Oakland's defense finished with just 31 sacks (tied for eighth fewest in the NFL) and 14 turnovers (one more than Cleveland's league-low total). That's shocking and inexplicable on a unit that has elite talents **KHALIL MACK** and **BRUCE IRVIN** flying in off the edges. They're paid to disrupt the quarterback's schedule, which is typically how a defense creates big plays.

× The Raiders' defense in '17 didn't have a consistent identity, but that will change under **PAUL GUENTHER**. The new coordinator has a well-defined scheme, built on 2-deep zone coverage and a bevy of interior blitz looks. Guenther will have more freedom under Gruden than he did with the Bengals under defensive-minded Marvin Lewis. Expect Guenther to run more blitzes than he did in Cincinnati.

HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES (COOPER); ROBERT BECK (GRUDEN)

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
10th RAMS	7th @CHARGERS	1st @49ERS	2nd CHIEFS
16th @BRONCOS	14th SEAHAWKS	11th CHARGERS	9th STEELERS
23rd @DOLPHINS	21st BYE	18th @CARDINALS	16th @BENGALS
30th BROWNS	28th COLTS	25th @RAVENS	24th BRONCOS
			30th @CHIEFS

■ Monday ■ Thursday
■ In London

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
13	22	18	6	18	29

DB 29 Weakness

× **DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR PAUL GUENTHER** likes to keep two safeties back and play zone coverage—and he'd have to anyway, given his unproven cornerbacks. After a shin injury **GAREON CONLEY** played just two games as a rookie in 2017.

NFC EAST

PHILADELPHIA »

2017 RECORD 13W 3L | 11W 5L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
6th FALCONS	7th VIKINGS	4th BYE	3rd REDSKINS
16th @BUCS	11th @GIANTS	11th COWBOYS	9th @COWBOYS
23rd COLTS	21st PANTHERS	18th @SAINTS	16th @RAMS
30th @TITANS	28th @JAGUARS	25th GIANTS	23rd TEXANS
			30th @REDSKINS

■ Monday ■ Thursday ■ In London

EAGLES

»WELCOME BACK: CARSON WENTZ. There is zero debate about who should be the starting quarterback once Wentz is healthy, after injuring his left ACL and LCL in Week 14. Yes, **NICK FOLES** was spectacular in the playoffs—he even made the difficult deep throws late in the down from muddy pockets, as Wentz does. But Wentz, 25, is on track to become the NFL's best quarterback, and soon. He can make plays within structure and outside of structure. He's lethal from within the pocket and on the move. He's smart enough to call a game at the line of scrimmage. He can make anticipatory far-sideline throws and accurate deep heaves while in a defensive lineman's grasp. He does it all.

× Is **DOUG PEDERSON** the NFL's best coach? In Super Bowl LII he outclassed the man who has long held that title, New England's Bill Belichick. Pederson's offense is as well-honed as anyone's. Even with limited receivers Philly still produces aerially with complex formations and intertwined route combinations. The ground game, schematically, is the NFL's most rich—by far. And Pederson has shown the ability to keep harmony in a locker room populated by players with diverse, strongly held religious and political views. That's not easy.

× The Eagles replaced reliable backups Brent Celek and Trey Burton with second-round rookie **DALLAS GOEDERT** and journeyman **RICHARD RODGERS**, and they will still run a lot of multi-tight-end sets. Pederson employed those often in '16, when the receiving corps was a shambles. It's now better, but still so-so. **ALSHON JEFFERY** is a bit plodding, **MIKE WALLACE** is fast but stiff and **NELSON AGHOLOR** is strictly a slot weapon.

× In passing situations, defensive coordinator **JIM SCHWARTZ** is brilliant at scheming one-on-one matchups for his bevy of talented D-linemen, particularly Pro Bowl tackle **FLETCHER COX**. One tactic Schwartz uses is to align Cox directly over the center. Then Schwartz either overloads one side or goes with a diamond look, flanking Cox with two defenders on each side. Both strategies isolate Cox against the center, whom he can always overpower.

ABBIE PARR/GETTY IMAGES (COX); ROBERT BECK (WENTZ)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
7 Strength	18	23	4	4	16

× **THIS RANKING** moves up three or four spots if **CARSON WENTZ** effectively comes back from his left-knee injury. His rare ability to extend plays from within the pocket gives Philadelphia one of the league's best third-down offenses.

NFC EAST

NEW YORK GIANTS

2017 RECORD 3W 13L

8W 8L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

»WELCOME BACK: ELI MANNING . . . for a 15th season in New York. GM **DAVE GETTLEMAN** was wise to not use the No. 2 pick to draft a successor to the 37-year-old quarterback, whose struggles in 2017 were due to his depleted O-line and receiving corps. Physically, Manning shows no decline. With a better cast he should again look like the QB who averaged 4,290 yards and 30 touchdowns in the three seasons before '17.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th JAGUARS	7th @PANTHERS	4th BYE	2nd BEARS
16th @COWBOYS	11th EAGLES	12th @49ERS	9th @REDSKINS
23rd @TEXANS	22nd @FALCONS	18th BUCS	16th TITANS
30th SAINTS	28th REDSKINS	25th @EAGLES	23rd @COLTS
			30th COWBOYS

■ Monday ■ Thursday ■ Flex/Saturday

× **SAQUON BARKLEY, ODELL BECKHAM** and **EVAN ENGRAM** make up the most dynamic RB-WR-TE trio in football. All can pose matchup problems from anywhere in the formation, giving new coach **PAT SHURMUR** boundless options. But each also needs to show that he can reliably perform his position's traditional tasks. New York's O-line was revamped by signing tackle **NATE SOLDER** from New England and guard **PATRICK OMAMEH** from Jacksonville, and the drafting of guard **WILL HERNANDEZ**, but it is still far from flawless, which will be a challenge for Barkley in the base run game. The electrifying Beckham must be a consistent possession target for this otherwise underwhelming receiving group. Engram must become at least a half-decent blocker. If not, then he's simply a No. 2 receiver, offering less schematic dimension than a flex tight end.

× Cornerbacks will make or break this defense. New coordinator **JAMES BETTCHER**'s pressure-intensive scheme depends on corners who can cover one-on-one. **JANORIS JENKINS** can be similar to what Bettcher, hired from Arizona, had in Patrick Peterson—assuming Jenkins rediscovers the discipline he showed in '16. Third-year player **ELI APPLE** can be one of the best mirror-coverage technicians. The success of these two is key because there's not much behind them, especially with supplemental third-round draft pick **SAM BEAL** out for the year with a shoulder injury.

× On first and second down, Bettcher likes to condense his D-line to eliminate interior run gaps. The Giants have good tackles for this in **DALVIN TOMLINSON** and especially **DAMON HARRISON**, the league's best run stuffer.

ERICK W. RASCO (BARKLEY); AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (MANNING)

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
12	10	7	26 Weakness	23	15

× **THE GIANTS** gave new left tackle **NATE SOLDER** a big contract, but he was inconsistent last year—that's why New England let him walk. Aside from rookie left guard **WILL HERNANDEZ**, the talent on the rest of the line is questionable.

NFC EAST

DALLAS »

2017 RECORD 9W 7L

8W 8L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

COWBOYS

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @PANTHERS	7th @TEXANS	5th TITANS	9th EAGLES
16th GIANTS	14th JAGUARS	11th @EAGLES	16th @COLTS
23rd @SEAHAWKS	21st @REDSKINS	18th @FALCONS	23rd BUCS
30th LIONS	28th BYE	22nd REDSKINS	30th @GIANTS
		29th SAINTS	

■ Monday ■ Thursday

»WELCOME BACK: Linebacker attack. The Cowboys rarely blitz; instead, their front four executes a variety of slants, stunts and twists. Most 4–3 teams save these tactics for third-and-long, but Dallas uses them on running downs too, attacking a gap and forcing the running back to redirect. To make this scheme work you need linebackers who can finish plays, which is why the Cowboys have invested in that position. This year All-Pro **SEAN LEE** and a healthy **JAYLON SMITH** will be joined by the team's No. 1 pick in '18, **LEIGHTON VANDER ESCH** of Boise State.

× Here's how critical Lee is to Dallas: In the 40 games that the inside 'backer has played over the last three years, the Cowboys have allowed an average of 20.6 points and 327.9 yards. In the nine games he has missed because of various injuries, they have given up 27.5 points and 380.6 yards.

× The Cowboys are deficient at wide receiver. Entering training camp, they have featured six to eight contributors who, while capable, would be third or fourth options on most teams. This means coach **JASON GARRETT** and coordinator **SCOTT LINEHAN** must change their offense and get rid of the spread formations that were built to emphasize departed veterans Dez Bryant and Jason Witten. With receivers who cannot win on their own in space, Dallas must use the running game to set up the pass.

× The good news is, running is what the Cowboys are great at. They have the NFL's best offensive line and an explosive, deceptive runner in **EZEKIEL ELLIOTT**. Factor in quarterback **DAK PRESCOTT**'s mobility, and it's an almost unbeatable combination. Prescott's rollouts, both real and fake, can tame a defense's backside pursuit.

× Prescott has what few mobile QBs possess: the poise and toughness to stay in the pocket and deliver with defenders closing in. That's crucial for long-term development. But Prescott is not an aggressive anticipation passer like most of the league's top pocket QBs. His skills, though, are exceptional for play-action, bootlegs and rollouts—tactics that pair well with a strong running game.

GREG NELSON (PRESCOTT); JAMES D SMITH/AP (SMITH)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
19	5	32	1	9 Strength	18

× **DEMARCUS LAWRENCE** is one of football's best all-around defenders. If **MALIEK COLLINS** recovers from his offseason foot injury and **DAVID IRVING** comes back strong from a four-game substance-abuse suspension, Dallas will have quite a D-line trio.

NFC EAST

WASHINGTON »

2017 RECORD 7W 9L | 5W 11L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

REDSKINS

»WELCOME BACK: Short inside passing game. Washington's two best weapons, tight end **JORDAN REED** and third-down back **CHRIS THOMPSON**, missed significant time with injuries last year. (Reed was out with hamstring and rib injuries, Thompson with a fractured right fibula.) Both are healthy now, so the offense will go through them. Reed is lethal on slants, Thompson on angle and option routes. The Redskins' attack will be a nightmare for opposing inside linebackers.

× Kirk Cousins for **ALEX SMITH** is not an apples-for-apples switch at QB. Cousins, who left for the Vikings, is an attack-minded passer who must be reeled in. Smith, acquired from Kansas City, is a dinker-and-dunker who must be prodded into taking chances. He won't pull the trigger until he sees—and then sometimes verifies—that a receiver is open. Even in pristine pockets he will lose form before working to his backside progressions. Smith will drive coach **JAY GRUDEN** crazy by November.

× The Redskins have two of the league's finest on-the-move blockers in left tackle **TRENT WILLIAMS** and right guard **BRANDON SCHERFF**. Williams's athleticism on the perimeter keys their screen game. Scherff's mobility in the trenches defines many of their man-blocking runs. Both are excellent in Gruden's foundational zone ground game.

× Cornerback **JOSH NORMAN**'s sense for route angles and timing is superb, but when plays get extended, you see his limitations—including his ho-hum speed. His first two years in Washington have been disappointing relative to his salary ($50 million guaranteed). Norman will make more plays if recent high picks on the D-line can bolster the rush.

× Inside linebacker **ZACH BROWN**'s high-octane 2017 performance earned him a three-year, $24 million contract. For this investment to pay off, the 28-year-old must be more consistent at diagnosing plays. Sometimes he bursts into the backfield, other times he looks as if he's counting *Mississippis*. If Brown improves, so will a run defense that ranked 29th in yards per attempt last season.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @CARDINALS	8th @SAINTS	4th FALCONS	3rd @EAGLES
16th COLTS	14th PANTHERS	11th @BUCS	9th GIANTS
23rd PACKERS	21st COWBOYS	18th TEXANS	16th @JAGUARS
30th BYE	28th @GIANTS	22nd @COWBOYS	23rd @TITANS
			30th EAGLES

■ Monday ■ Thursday ■ Flex/Saturday

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
21	26	14	5	27 Weakness	28

× **RYAN KERRIGAN** can bend the edge as a pass rusher, but the rest of this front four is suspect. Much depends on **JONATHAN ALLEN** and **RYAN ANDERSON**, Washington's top two choices in the 2017 draft.

RYAN KANG/AP (NORMAN); RIC TAPIA/AP FOR NFLPA (REED)

NFC NORTH

GREEN BAY PACKERS

2017 RECORD 7W 9L | 11W 5L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th BEARS	7th @LIONS	4th @PATRIOTS	2nd CARDINALS
16th VIKINGS	15th 49ERS	11th DOLPHINS	9th FALCONS
23rd @REDSKINS	21st BYE	15th @SEAHAWKS	16th @BEARS
30th BILLS	28th @RAMS	25th @VIKINGS	23rd @JETS
			30th LIONS

■ Monday ■ Thursday

»WELCOME BACK: MIKE PETTINE, who had been out of the league since 2015. The defensive coordinator has a philosophy similar to that of the man he replaces, Dom Capers: exotic pass-rush designs and man coverage on the perimeter. This explains the selections of corners **JAIRE ALEXANDER** and **JOSH JACKSON** in the first and second rounds, respectively. With second-year player **KEVIN KING**, they may be the most gifted young cornerbacking trio in the NFL. Strong man-to-man coverage gives Pettine's blitzes the best chance to succeed.

× Coach **MIKE MCCARTHY** talked this offseason about taking his playbook "back to page one." But don't expect to see a whole new offense. Almost every NFL system ultimately takes on the shape of its quarterback, and that is especially true when a superstar such as **AARON RODGERS** is at the helm. Though he is capable of beating defenses with presnap reads and quick throws, Rodgers frequently passes up open receivers and leaves clean pockets, which would warrant a reprimand for most QBs. But he's so exceptional that he often goes on to make a better play. The tricky part for McCarthy is that Rodgers's approach is more conducive to spread formations and isolation routes which, when relied upon too heavily, can lead to dry spells in the passing game. The challenge is to find the proper mix.

× The Packers spent wisely when they signed tight end **JIMMY GRAHAM**. After playing three seasons with Russell Wilson in Seattle, Graham is familiar with the sandlot style that Green Bay drills. With his size and post-up ability he can make the back-shoulder and red-zone catches that had been the stock-in-trade of the now-departed **JORDY NELSON**.

× A pressure-oriented defense must force obvious passing situations to blitz against, which means it has to stop the run. Green Bay's D-line, led by **MIKE DANIELS** at end, is potentially one of the league's best. We say *potentially* because '16 first-rounder **KENNY CLARK** has shown immense talent at tackle, but only in spurts, and **MUHAMMAD WILKERSON**, signed from the Jets, hasn't played up to his ability since 2015.

SIMON BRUTY (RODGERS); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (PETTINE)

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
2	23 Weakness	11	8	10	21

× **WITH SCATBACK TY MONTGOMERY** and second-year pros **JAMAAL WILLIAMS** and **AARON JONES**, the Packers have balance and depth. The question is, Can any of these backs separate himself and become Green Bay's playmaker?

NFC NORTH

MINNESOTA » VIKINGS

2017 RECORD 13W 3L

11W 5L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

»WELCOME BACK: Vikings quarterback hype. The signing of **KIRK COUSINS** from Washington for a guaranteed $84 million over three years has generated the most excitement about the position since Minnesota inked Brett Favre in 2009. The Vikings know they're ready to contend and didn't want to bank on journeyman Case Keenum reprising his performance of '17, when he came off the bench and led them to the NFC championship game. Ultimately, Minnesota's return on investment will depend on how well Cousins executes when plays break down—sandlot situations in which Keenum shockingly thrived. Cousins can consistently capitalize when the play design wins; the results are more uneven when he's had to ad-lib.

× Cousins's best friends in this offense are wide receivers **ADAM THIELEN** and **STEFON DIGGS**, two of the league's most dazzling route runners. They possess not just speed and quickness but also the ability to harness them, sacrificing almost no body control when accelerating or decelerating. That's the key to their gaining separation from defenders.

× Minnesota's defense ranked first in both points and yards last season, and it should be even better this year. The core stars are all in their primes, including **HARRISON SMITH** and **ANDREW SENDEJO**, the NFL's best safety tandem. Smith is a five-tool player who doesn't miss open-field tackles or turnover opportunities. He's excellent as a strongside run defender and dangerous as a weakside pass defender. Coach **MIKE ZIMMER** employs traditional zone concepts that are not especially complex as NFL defenses go, but the flexibility of Smith and Sendejo gives coverages just enough texture and disguise to make a QB hesitate.

× There's an argument against Smith's being the most important player on Minnesota's defense: It's **XAVIER RHODES**. Smith does his job better than anyone, but Rhodes, a physical corner who shadows No. 1 targets, has a more meaningful role. Last season he won battles against receivers ranging from Pittsburgh's quick and darting Antonio Brown to the long and limber Mike Evans of Tampa Bay.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th 49ERS	7th @EAGLES	4th LIONS	2nd @PATRIOTS
16th @PACKERS	14th CARDINALS	11th BYE	10th @SEAHAWKS
23rd BILLS	21st @JETS	18th @BEARS	16th DOLPHINS
27th @RAMS	28th SAINTS	25th PACKERS	23rd @LIONS
			30th BEARS

■ Monday ■ Thursday

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
16	11	4	18	1	1
				Strength	

× **AT END, EVERSON GRIFFEN** has great technique and power, while **DANIELLE HUNTER** has fantastic length and quickness. At tackle, **LINVAL JOSEPH** is the game's strongest run plugger and **SHELDON RICHARDSON** is a gap-shooting ace.

PETER READ MILLER/AP (RHODES); SIMON BRUTY (COUSINS)

NFC NORTH

DETROIT LIONS

2017 RECORD 9W 7L | 10W 6L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
10th JETS	7th PACKERS	4th @VIKINGS	2nd RAMS
16th @49ERS	14th BYE	11th @BEARS	9th @CARDINALS
23rd PATRIOTS	21st @DOLPHINS	18th PANTHERS	16th @BILLS
30th @COWBOYS	28th SEAHAWKS	22nd BEARS	23rd VIKINGS
			30th @PACKERS

■ Monday ■ Thursday

»WELCOME BACK: Lions ground game. It has been anemic since Barry Sanders retired after the 1998 season, and in 2017 Detroit ranked dead last with 3.4 yards per attempt. That's why GM Bob Quinn spent his first-round pick on road-grading Arkansas guard **FRANK RAGNOW** and his second-rounder on Auburn tailback **KERRYON JOHNSON**. With a system that affords **MATTHEW STAFFORD** the freedom to check in and out of runs at the line of scrimmage, the pieces are in place for a rejuvenated rushing attack.

× Stafford has led 20 fourth-quarter comebacks over the last four years, the most in the league. One reason: He can use his exceptional arm to attack the spaces that open up in Cover 2, which is what teams most commonly use when protecting a lead.

× **THEO RIDDICK** remains one of the three or four best pass-catching backs in football, especially on angle and option routes. He poses significant problems for defenses out of three-receiver sets because the play design naturally links his route to that of their inside receiver **GOLDEN TATE**. That often means linebackers must try to take on Riddick's imposing combination of underneath speed and shiftiness.

× New coach **MATT PATRICIA**'s defensive scheme demands versatile defensive backs, and the Lions have several: Corners **TEEZ TABOR**, **NEVIN LAWSON** and **DESHAWN SHEAD** are experienced at playing outside and in the slot. Projected slot starter **QUANDRE DIGGS**—maybe the best player nobody talks about—flourished as a fast, hard-hitting fill-in safety late last year. Veterans **TAVON WILSON** and **GLOVER QUIN** have experience playing deep and in the box. Patricia also has a true No. 1 cornerback to build around in **DARIUS SLAY**.

× Second-year linebacker **JARRAD DAVIS** has uncanny physical talent. He's thick and limber, and he glides, almost as if he's playing on skates. If the 6' 2", 227-pound Davis can become more comfortable in coverage (he had to leave the field in certain nickel situations late last season) he'll be one of the NFL's premier players.

REY DEL RIO/GETTY IMAGES (STAFFORD); KOHJIRO KINNO (JOHNSON)

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
8 Strength	25	9	9	25	8

× **MATTHEW STAFFORD** is impressively durable—he's started every game for the last seven seasons—and he has one of the NFL's best arms. Not only can he rifle the ball, but he can also flick it with pinpoint accuracy from different arm angles and stances.

NFC NORTH

CHICAGO »

2017 RECORD 5W 11L

7W 9L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

BEARS

»WELCOME BACK: Linebacking excellence. Dick Butkus. Mike Singletary. Brian Urlacher. And now, the Bears hope, **ROQUAN SMITH**. At 6' 1" and 236 pounds, the No. 8 pick from Georgia is just big enough to handle the run and, more important, quick enough to compete in coverage. Coordinator **VIC FANGIO**'s unit, regarded as one of football's best-coached defenses, presents "blurry" zone looks that are hard to read. The safeties create much of that blurriness, but linebackers provide a critical element too. Smith can make a good D great.

× The most underrated player in the NFL is defensive end **AKIEM HICKS**. He has great initial burst and thundering strength, and the 6' 5" 318-pounder's technique became more refined in 2017.

× First-time coach **MATT NAGY** was hired from Kansas City, where he had been offensive coordinator, because his system features the misdirection, presnap motioning and multi-option plays that are now in vogue. Nagy aims to isolate specific defenders (often linebackers) and present them with run/pass assignment conflicts. He also gets defenders flowing one way as the ball goes another. Chicago needs a highly schemed approach for quarterback **MITCHELL TRUBISKY**, whose physical tools are good but not great.

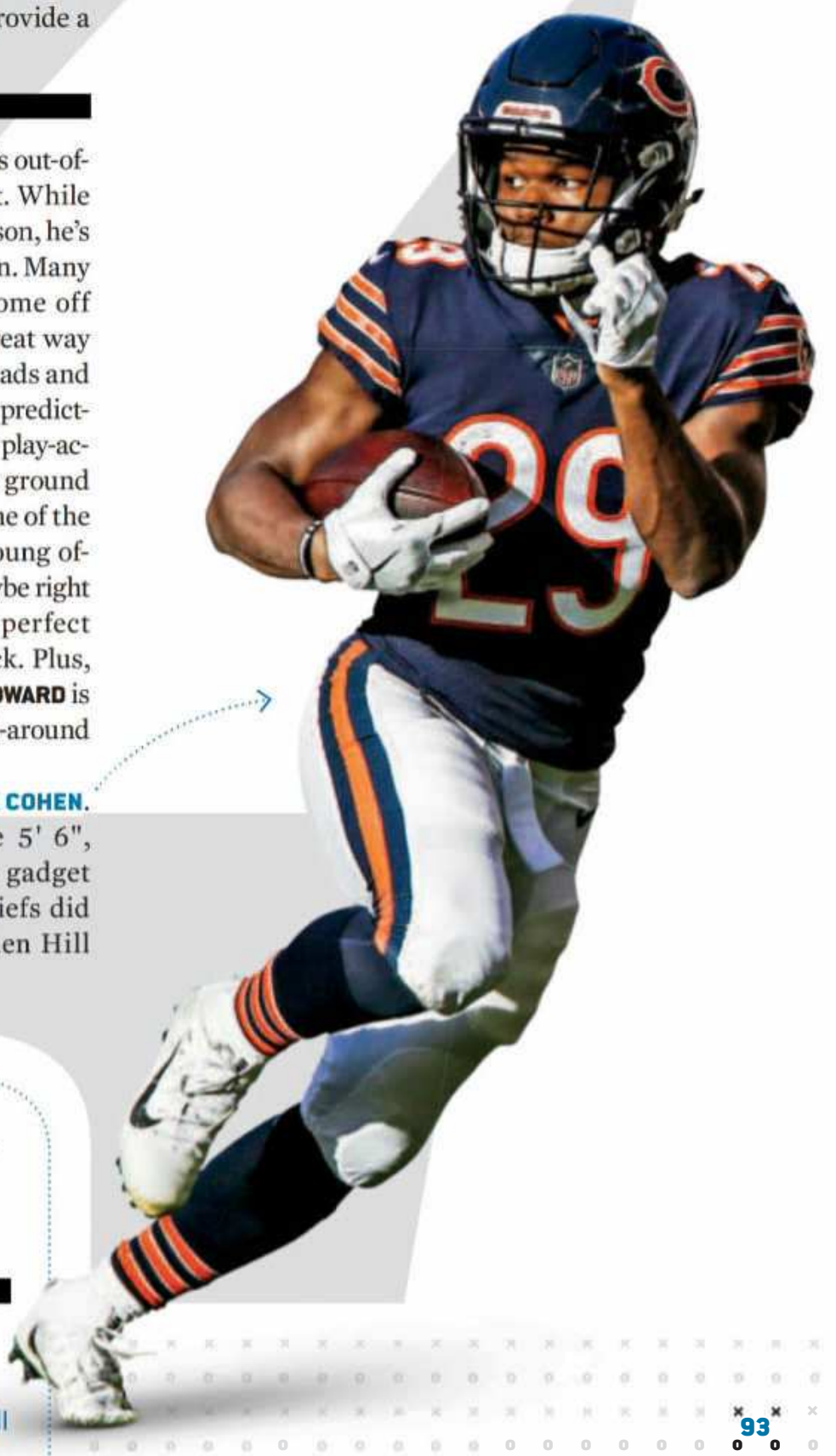
× Though coming into his second NFL season after only 13 starts at North Carolina, Trubisky's out-of-pocket vision is excellent. While he's not quite Russell Wilson, he's deft at throwing on the run. Many rollouts and bootlegs come off play-action, which is a great way to limit a quarterback's reads and get him throwing against predictable looks. Moving-pocket play-action goes well with a zone ground game, and Chicago has one of the best. Everyone on this young offensive line, except for maybe right tackle **BOBBY MASSIE**, is perfect for a zone-blocking attack. Plus, workhorse back **JORDAN HOWARD** is arguably football's best all-around zone runner.

× Learn the name **TARIK COHEN**. Chicago will use the 5' 6", 180-pound second-year gadget weapon the way the Chiefs did Tyreek Hill in 2016, when Hill was a rookie sensation.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @PACKERS	7th BYE	4th @BILLS	2nd @GIANTS
17th SEAHAWKS	14th @DOLPHINS	11th LIONS	9th RAMS
23rd @CARDINALS	21st PATRIOTS	18th VIKINGS	16th PACKERS
30th BUCS	28th JETS	22nd @LIONS	23rd @49ERS
			30th @VIKINGS

■ Monday ■ Thursday



» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
28	8	20	15	24 Weakness	9

× **LEONARD FLOYD,** the ninth pick out of Georgia in 2016, missed six games last year with a right-knee injury. If the outside linebacker can capitalize on his raw talent, Chicago will be just a pass rusher away from an elite defense.

TANNEN MAURY/EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK (COHEN); ROBIN ALAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (SMITH)

NFC SOUTH

ATLANTA »

2017 RECORD 10W 6L | 12W 4L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

FALCONS

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
6th @EAGLES	7th @STEELERS	4th @REDSKINS	2nd RAVENS
16th PANTHERS	14th BUCS	11th @BROWNS	9th @PACKERS
23rd SAINTS	22nd GIANTS	18th COWBOYS	16th CARDINALS
30th BENGALS	28th BYE	22nd @SAINTS	23rd @PANTHERS
			30th @BUCS

■ *Monday* ■ *Thursday*

»WELCOME BACK: Two-back sets? Atlanta's offense has been at its best when **TEVIN COLEMAN** and **DEVONTA FREEMAN** are both on the field. Offensive coordinator **STEVE SARKISIAN**, entering his second season with the Falcons, should have the backs out there together 15 to 20 snaps per game. Both are both tremendous zone runners—Freeman with his vision and inside shiftiness, Coleman with his deceptive speed. But they're really potent together because each has the ability to flex out as a receiver, and there's no effective defensive counter for that.

× Despite ranking third in pass efficiency, eighth in run efficiency and first in third-down efficiency last year, the offense dropped from first in the NFL in scoring to 15th, with 11.7 fewer points per game. To fix this, Sarkisian must find the harmony between running and passing designs that his predecessor, current 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan, had developed. This is doable. With a strong outside zone running game, a savvy QB in **MATT RYAN** and football's scariest wide receiver, **JULIO JONES**, throwing out of running formations should come naturally to the Falcons. Adding receiver **CALVIN RIDLEY**, their first-round pick from Alabama, will help.

× Quietly, coach **DAN QUINN** has built a terrific defense. But in his fourth year, anything short of greatness will be disappointing. The front line boasts potent pass rushers in **GRADY JARRETT**, **VIC BEASLEY** and **TAKK MCKINLEY**. Linebackers **DEION JONES** and **DE'VONDRE CAMPBELL** play fast. So do safeties **KEANU NEAL** and **RICARDO ALLEN**, who can also cover. Cornerbacks **DESMOND TRUFANT** and **ROBERT ALFORD** are sound and versatile. This D has flashed at every level but not consistently and together. It's time.

× Quinn's defense demands speed. His zone coverages concede space underneath, so defenders must be able to rally to the ball. Those same coverages can leave linebackers and safeties matched with a wide receiver downfield, when their only prayer is to recognize the route early and run with him. Speed is also key to man-coverage assignments, which the Falcons took advantage of in 2017, when their defense ranked ninth in the league.

SIMON BRUTY (RYAN); JONATHAN BACHMAN/GETTY IMAGES (COLEMAN)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
6	1	2 Strength	10	12	3

× **NO WIDE RECEIVER** possesses a better combination of size (6' 3", 220 pounds) and speed than **JULIO JONES**. When he's on the field, safeties must help out in coverage, which allows Atlanta to dictate favorable matchups for its other pass catchers.

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NFC SOUTH

NEW ORLEANS »

2017 RECORD 11W 5L | 11W 5L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

SAINTS

»WELCOME BACK: The playmaking tailback. It has been eight years since Reggie Bush was terrorizing opposing defenses with his running and receiving prowess. **ALVIN KAMARA**, the 2017 Offensive Rookie of the Year, does what Bush did, but at a higher level. Kamara runs with blinding speed and unbelievable balance. His receiving abilities grew exponentially as a rookie, and he was particularly dangerous when he aligned on the weak side in empty-backfield formations. What a great gift for 39-year-old **DREW BREES**.

× Brees is as fundamentally sound as a quarterback can be. This is why, despite his declining arm strength, he's as prolific as ever. Brees moves within the pocket brilliantly. He reads defenses correctly 99% of the time. He's a master at manipulating zone defenders with his eyes and body mechanics. He is accurate enough to throw receivers open against the tightest of man coverages. NFL quarterback coaches know Tom Brady is the best, but when they make tutorial tapes for young QBs, it's Brees's film they show the most.

× One could argue that cornerback **MARSHON LATTIMORE** is more valuable to the Saints than any other NFL defender is to his team. His rare ability to shadow No. 1 receivers (in the NFC South that means Julio Jones and Mike Evans twice a year) enables defensive coordinator **DENNIS ALLEN** to unleash every dimension of his scheme. Allen uses all forms of zone and man coverage, and he can only do that with a corner locking down one side of the field.

× With New Orleans trading next year's first-round pick to move up and draft UT–San Antonio edge rusher **MARCUS DAVENPORT** at No. 14, you wonder if Allen isn't looking to simplify. A strong pass rush from the front four allows the back seven to play more simply and quickly. Davenport joins an already ascending group. **CAM JORDAN** improves every year. **SHELDON RANKINS** selflessly attacks blockers to set up teammates. **TREY HENDRICKSON,** a '17 third-round pick, is not an elite talent, but he is effective inside and outside.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th BUCS	8th REDSKINS	4th RAMS	9th @BUCS
16th BROWNS	14th BYE	11th @BENGALS	17th @PANTHERS
23rd @FALCONS	21st @RAVENS	18th EAGLES	23rd STEELERS
30th @GIANTS	28th @VIKINGS	22nd FALCONS	30th PANTHERS
		29th @COWBOYS	

■ Monday ■ Thursday

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
3	2	17	2 Strength	17	12

× **ON THIS** loaded line, left tackle **TERRON ARMSTEAD** is as athletic as they come, left guard **ANDRUS PEAT** is a monster run-blocking on the move and outstanding second-year right tackle **RYAN RAMCZYK** can go without help in pass protection.

AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (LATTIMORE); JEFFERY A. SLATER (KAMARA)

NFC SOUTH

CAROLINA »

2017 RECORD 11W 5L

7W 9L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

PANTHERS

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th COWBOYS	7th GIANTS	4th BUCS	2nd @BUCS
16th @FALCONS	14th @REDSKINS	8th @STEELERS	9th @BROWNS
23rd BENGALS	21st @EAGLES	18th @LIONS	17th SAINTS
30th BYE	28th RAVENS	25th SEAHAWKS	23rd FALCONS
			30th @SAINTS

■ Monday ■ Thursday

»WELCOME BACK: NORV TURNER, the venerated offensive coordinator who was out of football in 2017. Turner's star pupils have included Troy Aikman and Philip Rivers, but the 66-year-old has never worked with a mobile quarterback like **CAM NEWTON**. While Turner's downfield attack would seem a perfect match for Newton's power arm, the QB's erratic mechanics can cause him to miss—often wildly—on routine throws, and that won't change eight years into his NFL career. That's why Turner must use Newton's legs to stabilize the offense. Not only is Newton an effective runner, but the threat of his rushing forces defenders to move closer to the line, and to read and react a beat slower.

× Even with Newton and the signing of running back **C.J. ANDERSON** from Denver, the ground game won't prosper if Carolina's O-line doesn't generate more push, and that is going to be a challenge. Center **RYAN KALIL** is 33 and coming off an injury-plagued season, while last year's top blocker, left guard **ANDREW NORWELL**, left for the Jaguars in free agency. Pass protection is also a concern. Kalil's brother Matt must get stronger at left tackle. So must fifth-year right guard **TRAI TURNER**, who lately has floundered against quality bull rushers.

× Middle linebacker **LUKE KUECHLY**, entering his seventh season, is football's best defensive player. His speed and play recognition confound run blockers, and he has developed into the best 'backer in vertical coverage. That was the area that Kuechly felt he most needed to improve early in his career.

× The Panthers blitzed more than any NFC team last year (42.7%). But with longtime D-line coach **ERIC WASHINGTON** taking over after defensive coordinator Steve Wilks left to coach the Cardinals, expect a return to traditional zone coverage behind a straight four-man rush. Carolina's line improved last year as the season went on, but in the offseason tackle Star Lotulelei left for Buffalo. Washington needs 2016 first-round pick **VERNON BUTLER** to blossom like **MARIO ADDISON**, whose athleticism now shines through regularly at end thanks to improved technique.

JIM DEDMON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (KUECHLY); DAVID T. FOSTER III/CHARLOTTE OBSERVER/TNS/GETTY IMAGES (TURNER)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
17	16	19	23	3	27
					Weakness

× **THE GOOD** news is that new defensive coordinator **ERIC WASHINGTON**'s zone scheme places minimal stress on corners and safeties. A team can't invest heavily at every position, and Carolina believes its front seven can mask a low-cost secondary.

NFC SOUTH

TAMPA BAY »

2017 RECORD 5W 11L | 5W 11L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

BUCCANEERS

»WELCOME BACK: Pass rush (maybe). Bigger names than **JASON PIERRE-PAUL** and **VINNY CURRY** changed teams this offseason, but few will mean as much to their new clubs. Last year Tampa Bay had a league-low 22 sacks and the NFL's 32nd-ranked pass defense. True, the Bucs' new defensive ends are not saviors: They were available because they didn't have the edge-bending prowess to justify big contracts from the Giants and Eagles, respectively. But they both have good lateral movement and sound technique, and they can be highly effective on stunts, slants and twists, where they attack blockers at angles and create pass-rush lanes for others.

× The downside of running a pure zone D is that an offense can easily dictate matchups through its formations. Last year opponents were consistently able to force Tampa Bay safeties **CHRIS CONTE** and **JUSTIN EVANS** to cover their top wide receivers downfield. It's critical that the four-man rush gets home before these mismatches can unfold.

× The defense's strength: Linebackers **KWON ALEXANDER** and, especially, **LAVONTE DAVID** are sensational run defenders. They have sideline-to-sideline speed and, more important, they play downhill, aggressively attacking blockers who try to double-team a D-lineman.

× **JAMEIS WINSTON**, who will miss the opening three games of the season for inappropriately touching a female Uber driver in 2016, has to mature on the field as well as off it. He has a rich understanding of defenses, but because he has one of the league's strongest arms he takes too many chances, attacking the smallest of openings when he would be better off throwing the ball away. Winston can be especially reckless when plays break down. If he doesn't correct this he won't be back in 2019.

× **DESEAN JACKSON** had just 10 catches of 20 yards or longer last season, which ranked 37th in the NFL. That's unacceptable for a player with his skill set and speed in a system built on deep corner, post and dig routes. Plus, **MIKE EVANS** attracts most of the attention from opposing defenses. Jackson had 668 receiving yards in 2017; he should have between 800 and 1,000 this year.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @SAINTS	7th BYE	4th @PANTHERS	2nd PANTHERS
16th EAGLES	14th @FALCONS	11th REDSKINS	9th SAINTS
24th STEELERS	21st BROWNS	18th @GIANTS	16th @RAVENS
30th @BEARS	28th @BENGALS	25th 49ERS	23rd @COWBOYS
			30th FALCONS

■ *Monday*

DON JUAN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES (WINSTON); CLIFF WELCH/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (PIERRE-PAUL)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
22	31 Weakness	6	12	15	30

× **THE BUCCANEERS** hope that 5' 11", 205-pound **RONALD JONES II**, a second-round rookie from USC, can provide a spark in the ground game. The Tampa backfield has been wanting since 2015, when Doug Martin rushed for 1,402 yards.

NFC WEST

LOS ANGELES RAMS »

2017 RECORD 11W 5L | 10W 6L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
10th @RAIDERS	7th @SEAHAWKS	4th @SAINTS	2nd @LIONS
16th CARDINALS	14th @BRONCOS	11th SEAHAWKS	9th @BEARS
23rd CHARGERS	21st @49ERS	19th CHIEFS	16th EAGLES
27th VIKINGS	28th PACKERS	25th BYE	23rd @CARDINALS
			30th 49ERS

■ Monday ■ Thursday
■ In Mexico City

»WELCOME BACK: Greatest Show on Turf. This new edition is on grass—and in Los Angeles, not St. Louis. But the Rams have elite receivers for the first time since Torry Holt and Isaac Bruce performed their high-wire act (1999–2007). The Show's new star is **BRANDIN COOKS**, acquired from New England in April for the 23rd pick in the draft. Cooks, 24, is not only one of football's fastest receivers, but he also has outstanding throttle-down ability, a lethal skill for a speedster. On third downs expect coach **SEAN MCVAY** to line him up alone on the weak side, where he's most able to influence coverages. If a safety comes to help against Cooks, that will set up **ROBERT WOODS** and **COOPER KUPP** on the strong side for the intertwined routes that McVay excels at designing.

× **JARED GOFF** is the right quarterback for this system. The third-year player relies on timing and rhythm, which suits a scheme that emphasizes play-action. Goff has the potential to be better than McVay's QB in Washington, Kirk Cousins, because Goff has the skills to function when plays break down. There's room for improvement, though: His footwork can falter under pressure, and he's not consistently comfortable making throws with bodies around him.

× L.A. uses its backs in the passing game as well as anyone. Having **TODD GURLEY** helps (a lot). He's sensational in space. To take advantage of his skills, McVay emphasizes backfield screens and routes to the flats.

× The Rams acquired **MARCUS PETERS** from the Chiefs and **AQIB TALIB** from the Broncos this offseason, and it will be exciting to watch a pair of high-risk playmaking corners operate, especially on a defense that has tackles **AARON DONALD** and **NDAMUKONG SUH** pushing upfield. But who will *close* the pocket? The Rams lack edge-benders, and if the rush doesn't get home, the gambles of Peters and Talib can backfire.

× Donald is the NFL's best 3-technique, but it's hard to see how a tackle on a unit that ranked 30th in yards per rushing attempt could win Defensive Player of the Year so handily. The ranking isn't all on Donald, but it explains Suh's one-year, $14 million free-agent deal.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (GURLEY); KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS (COOKS)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
15	6	5	7 Strength	14	5

× **AFTER THE** additions last year of left tackle **ANDREW WHITWORTH**, center **JOHN SULLIVAN** and O-line coach **AARON KROMER**, the Rams did anything they wanted schematically. Left guard **RODGER SAFFOLD**'s mobility is a screen-game weapon.

NFC WEST

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

» 2017 RECORD 6W 10L | 9W 7L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @VIKINGS	7th CARDINALS	1st RAIDERS	2nd @SEAHAWKS
16th LIONS	15th @PACKERS	12th GIANTS	9th BRONCOS
23rd @CHIEFS	21st RAMS	18th BYE	16th SEAHAWKS
30th @CHARGERS	28th @CARDINALS	25th @BUCS	23rd BEARS
			30th @RAMS

■ *Monday*
■ *Thursday*

»WELCOME BACK: San Francisco quarterback excellence. Not since the 20th century—with Joe Montana and Steve Young—have Niners fans been so giddy about the man calling the signals. Here's what's to love about 26-year-old **JIMMY GAROPPOLO**: He has a quick, compact release; he can get the ball out extra early, or extra late, in the down. He's steely enough to hang tough in a collapsing pocket, and mobile enough to escape. Also, there's his football IQ. He was acquired from the Patriots last Oct. 31 and started his first game 33 days later, not enough time for any QB to master **KYLE SHANAHAN**'s scheme and its verbiage. But Garoppolo grasped the route combinations and basic designs so well that he was able to make plays as he went, going 5–0 as a starter. Imagine what he'll accomplish with a full offseason of preparation.

× Shanahan's scheme is the NFL's most envied. It features presnap shifting and motioning that help reveal a defense's intentions, and pass plays designed to exploit those intentions. Running backs who can catch are key, which is why in March the 49ers signed Vikings free agent **JERICK MCKINNON** to a four-year, $30 million deal.

× The most critical D-line position in defensive coordinator Robert Saleh's scheme is the 3-technique, manned by explosive, long-armed **DEFOREST BUCKNER**. The 6' 7", 300-pound sensation is a dark-horse candidate for Defensive Player of the Year.

× The lack of a true edge rusher is a concern. Buckner and **SOLOMON THOMAS**, last year's No. 3 pick, are potentially dominant inside, but fourth-year end **ARIK ARMSTEAD** needs to bring more pressure from the outside. At 6' 7" and 292 pounds, Armstead is long and talented, but he's really more of an interior 3–4 end than the pure 4–3 end, which is how he'll line up in San Francisco.

× Much rides on the performance of three-time All-Pro cornerback **RICHARD SHERMAN**, 30, signed from the Seahawks this offseason after he ruptured his right Achilles last November. Other than **AHKELLO WITHERSPOON**, who showed flashes as a third-round rookie last year, the Niners have no proven entities at corner.

DANIEL GLUSKOTER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BUCKNER); SAMUEL STRINGER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (GAROPPOLO)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
11	24	28	16	22	31
		Weakness			

×**MARQUISE GOODWIN** and **PIERRE GARÇON** are a good start for this unit, but the other receiver spots are question marks. It will help, though, that coach **KYLE SHANAHAN** is a master at getting receivers matched up against linebackers.

NFC WEST

SEATTLE »

2017 RECORD 9W 7L | 7W 9L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

SEAHAWKS

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th @BRONCOS	7th RAMS	4th CHARGERS	2nd 49ERS
17th @BEARS	14th @RAIDERS	11th @RAMS	10th VIKINGS
23rd COWBOYS	21st BYE	15th PACKERS	16th @49ERS
30th @CARDINALS	28th @LIONS	25th @PANTHERS	23rd CHIEFS
			30th CARDINALS

■ Monday ■ Thursday
■ In London

»WELCOME BACK: A run-first approach. Picking San Diego State runner **RASHAAD PENNY** in the first round suggests what the offense will be under new coordinator **BRIAN SCHOTTENHEIMER** (even if Penny is out a few weeks with a broken finger). The Seahawks were more consistent from 2012 to '14, when they leaned on Marshawn Lynch. True, Lynch was a great back, but the run-first approach was also better for **RUSSELL WILSON**; his off-schedule playmaking can be sensational, but it makes for an inconsistent O. Defenses held Seattle to less than 230 yards passing in 10 games last season and less than 140 yards in three.

× An improved rushing attack—Seattle's was 23rd in 2017—plays to Wilson's strengths. Beating zone coverage requires timing and rhythm, which can be hard for the 5' 11" Wilson given his sight-line limitations in the pocket. When he's throwing on the move, however, his vision and touch are second to none. With a strong ground game, out-of-pocket pass designs become much more effective because they use similar blocking schemes. And with play-action, a QB usually gets deeper in his drop-back, making it easier to see downfield.

× With cornerback Richard Sherman now a 49er and strong safety Kam Chancellor retired because of a neck injury, Seattle's secondary is changing, but it is not necessarily in shambles. At left corner, second-year man **SHAQUILL GRIFFIN** has the physical technique to be the type of stopper Sherman was, though whether Griffin can approach Sherman's uncanny ball skills is yet to be seen. At strong safety, **BRADLEY MCDOUGALD** isn't Chancellor, but he's better than most people realize. The slot belongs to **JUSTIN COLEMAN**, a fourth-year player who is coming off a surprisingly stellar season. The biggest question is right corner, which appears to be **BYRON MAXWELL**'s job to lose.

× The defining trait of Seattle's great defenses has been speed up the middle. Free safety **EARL THOMAS** and linebackers **BOBBY WAGNER** and **K.J. WRIGHT** can get almost anywhere, and their coverage prowess is unmatched. With these three players back, this D has a chance to be formidable.

SIMON BRUTY (WILSON); KOHJIRO KINNO (PENNY)

» Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
10	29	27	28 Weakness	16	25

× **THE PROBLEM** isn't pedigree. Left tackle **DUANE BROWN** has been to Pro Bowls. The other starters (guard **D.J. FLUKER,** center **JUSTIN BRITT,** guard **ETHAN POCIC** and tackle **GERMAINE IFEDI**) were drafted in the first two rounds. They simply must play better.

NFC WEST

ARIZONA »

2017 RECORD 8W 8L

4W 12L SI'S 2018 PREDICTION

CARDINALS

»WELCOME BACK: LARRY FITZGERALD 2.0. Approaching 35, he has been as productive as ever, but by different means than early in his career. He's no longer swift enough to consistently win on the perimeter, but his patience and route running have translated remarkably well to the slot. He is a great reminder that speed can be overrated; as a receiver, defenders have to react to *your* tempo. Savvy technique can be enough to create separation. Fitz must put up huge numbers again in 2018, as the Cardinals have no other proven starters at wideout.

× During his brief stint as Minnesota's starter last season, before his left knee betrayed him, **SAM BRADFORD** flourished with the same underneath throws preferred by Arizona coordinator **MIKE MCCOY**. But **JOSH ROSEN**, the 10th pick, was the most pro-ready QB in this year's draft. At UCLA he worked many of the route combinations McCoy will feature. The Cardinals might begin 2018 with a win-now mentality, but it is likely to become a rebuilding year. Expect Rosen to unseat Bradford before season's end.

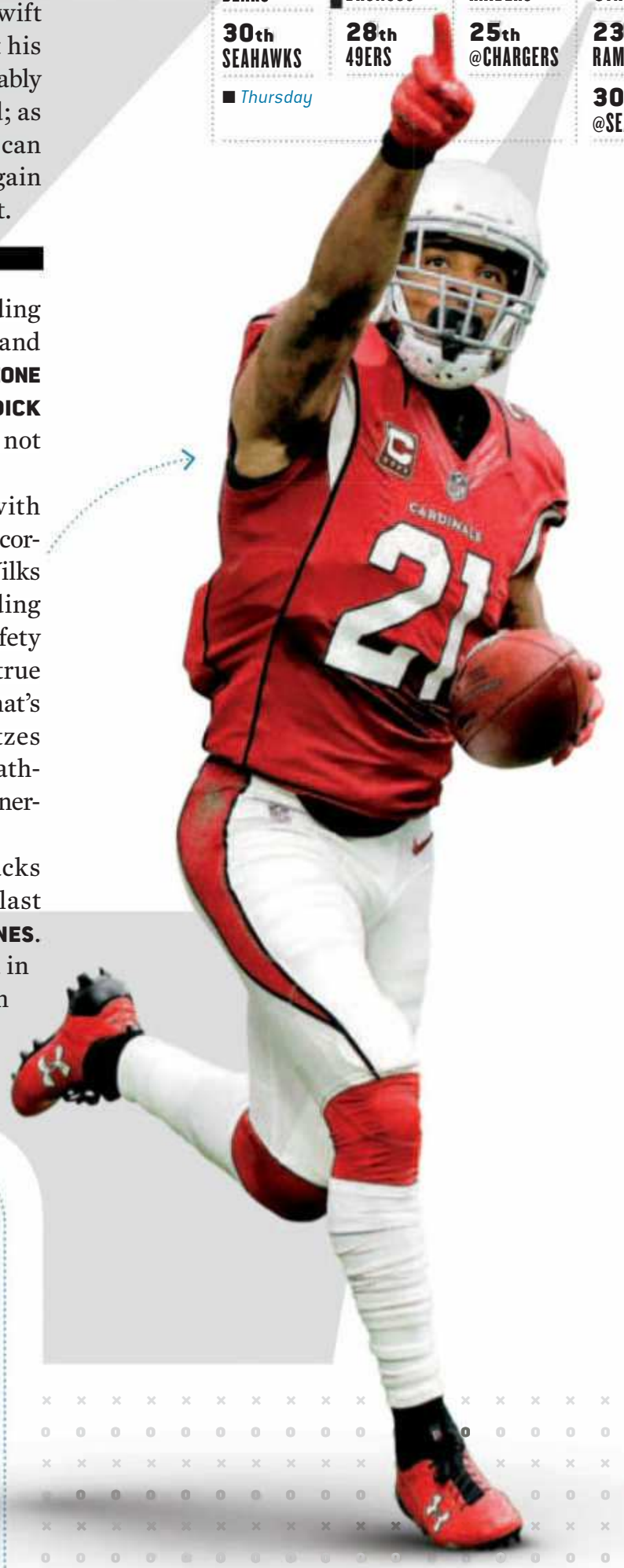
× New coach **STEVE WILKS** was a first-year defensive coordinator last season in Carolina and featured blitzes involving zone coverage, not man-to-man. That's rare; by converting a pass defender into a rusher, you enlarge the voids in your zones. Wilks could do that because he had outstanding linebackers in Luke Kuechly and Thomas Davis. In Arizona, **DEONE BUCANNON** and **HAASON REDDICK** have comparable speed, but not yet as much field awareness.

× What Wilks didn't have with the Panthers was a shutdown corner like **PATRICK PETERSON**. Wilks also didn't have an outstanding slot defender. Second-year safety **BUDDA BAKER** might not be a true slot corner, but considering that's where many of Wilks's blitzes come from, Baker, with his athletic burst, could become a cornerstone player there.

× No defender had more sacks or tackles for loss over the last two years than **CHANDLER JONES**. He'll be a pure defensive end in Wilks's scheme, giving him more chances to wreak havoc in the backfield.

2018 SCHEDULE

SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
9th REDSKINS	7th @49ERS	4th BYE	2nd @PACKERS
16th @RAMS	14th @VIKINGS	11th @CHIEFS	9th LIONS
23rd BEARS	■ 18th BRONCOS	18th RAIDERS	16th @FALCONS
30th SEAHAWKS	28th 49ERS	25th @CHARGERS	23rd RAMS
■ *Thursday*			30th @SEAHAWKS



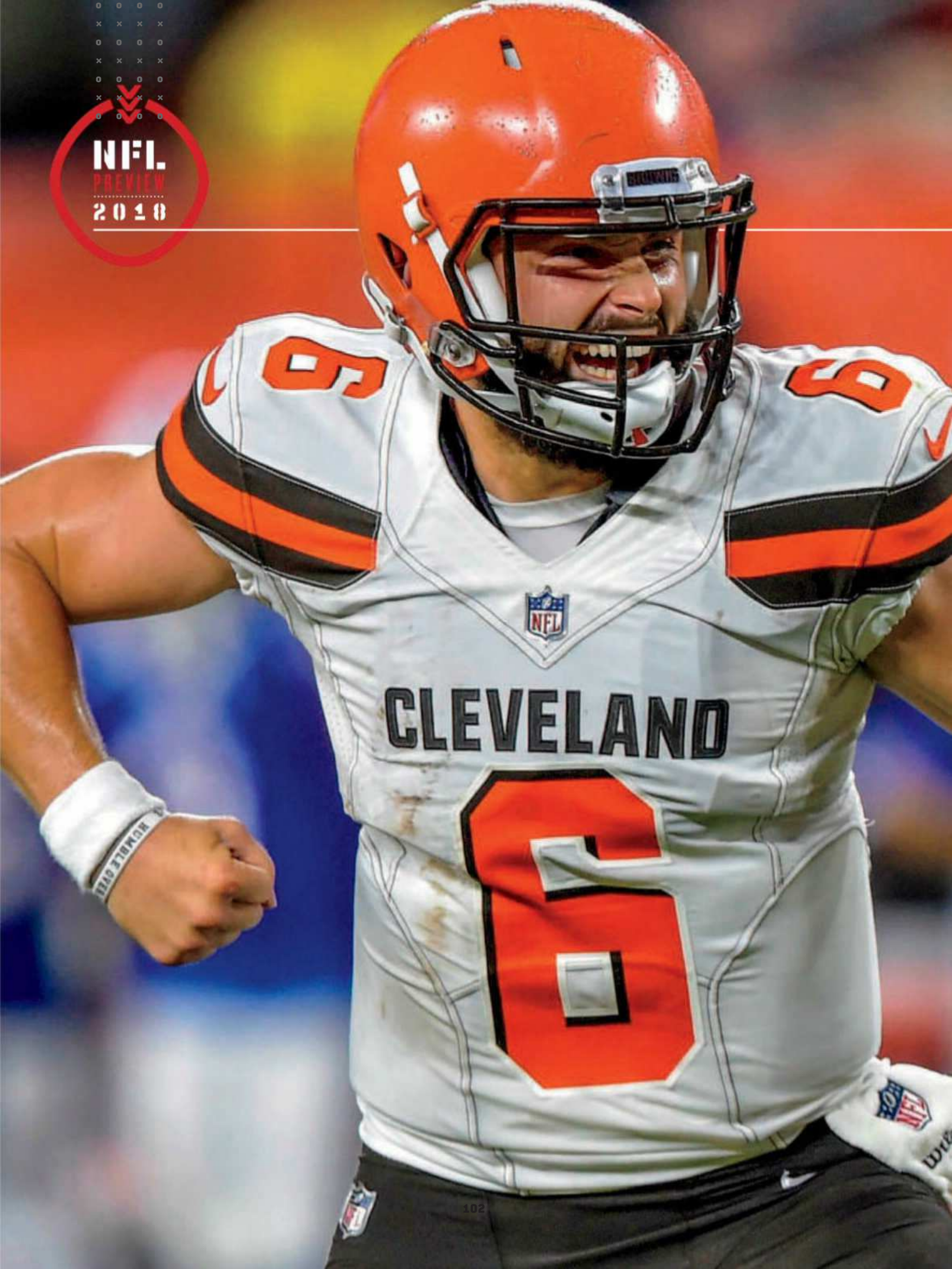
RICK SCUTERI/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (PETERSON); GREG TROTT/AP (FITZGERALD)

»Position Rankings

QB	RB	WR/TE	O-LINE	FRONT 7	DB
20	3	29	29 Weakness	11	22

× **ARIZONA HAS** struggled for years with its O-line. New coordinator **MIKE MCCOY**'s faster-developing designs will place less stress on his pass blockers than former coach Bruce Arians did, but this group will still struggle on third and long.

NFL
PREVIEW
2018



DAVID RICHARD/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

BY GARY GRAMLING

BETTOR SELVES

THE SEASON'S STORY LINES GET EVEN MORE INTERESTING WITH MONEY ON THE LINE. HOLD ON TO YOUR MORTGAGE!

SURELY YOU'VE heard by now: Sports gambling is legal. Not just legal, mandatory. They'll soon be adding it to the curriculum in public schools.

That's not quite accurate. In May the Supreme Court ruled the federal ban on state-sanctioned sports betting to be unconstitutional, paving the way for sports betting to—possibly, someday soon—become legal in your state. This season you will be battered by a deluge of advice on how to make your money grow through the magic of betting on the NFL. Anyone can break down favorites and underdogs for you. We're looking for unique investment opportunities. Here are nine prop bets you should get in on this season.

Number of times Hue Jackson is asked, "Are you really not starting Baker Mayfield in the opener?" over the first eight days of September: Over/Under 853.5

The Browns coach's stated desire to sit the No. 1 overall pick is curious for a few reasons. First, there's the fact that teams flocked to Norman to learn about the scheme Mayfield *(left)* mastered at Oklahoma. Any organization interested in drafting Mayfield was prepared to heavily

incorporate elements of the Sooners' attack—surely that included the one who actually did draft him. Second, Mayfield is NFL-ready. He can handle a ton of information and process it quickly. He's accurate. He's able to create when plays break down. And Cleveland's O-line is a strength, and the receivers are solid. Third, the one knock on Mayfield is his lack of size. Presumably, the Browns are not expecting the 6' 1" 23-year-old to have a growth spurt. Fourth, the placeholder in Cleveland is Tyrod Taylor, whose ultraconservative style emphasizes preventing turnovers to the point that he sometimes neglects to score points. The Browns need points.

OUR PICK: OVER. Jackson *(above)* is really going to do this, isn't he. Mayfield is really going to start the season on the bench. Apparently watching your team turn the ball over 41 times during an 0–16 season makes a man do strange things. Or—OR!—perhaps the team with one win over their past 32 games is making a particularly unwise decision.

Number of sad face emojis Dak Prescott texts to Dez Bryant this season: Over/Under 26

Bryant is not who he used to be, and it was only a matter of time until the Cowboys moved to get out from under a contract that paid him like he was still in his prime. But Dallas was surely caught off guard when future Hall of Fame tight end Jason Witten, a security blanket for Prescott *(right)*, retired last spring. The Cowboys enter 2018 with—on paper—the worst group of pass catchers in the NFL. There is not a single receiver or tight end on the roster who demands a double team—the kind of threat a healthy Bryant might have been able to provide. Dallas is built around running back Ezekiel Elliott, an all-world offensive line and the run game this season. But, as he enters Year 3, Prescott doesn't have the supporting cast to become the franchise QB the Cowboys might have to pay for when he's due for a contract extension next offseason.

OUR PICK: UNDER. The ice-cold market for Bryant after he was released—he still hasn't signed—shows what most teams think of the one-time star: He's lost a step. Nostalgia for the good old days of 2016 will hit Prescott every now and then, but there's enough of a run game in Dallas to give the 'Boys a chance at a wild-card spot.

Fans in attendance when the Chargers clinch the NFC West vs. guests attending your nephew's bar mitzvah: Minus 53.5

The Rams dominated the headlines this past offseason, but they're not even the best team in their city. Yes, there's another team in L.A.—some people may recall that the Chargers moved there last year. They're the only team in pro football that plays in a soccer stadium. They're also the only team that boasts bona fide stars at each of the most important positions in the NFL: quarterback (Philip Rivers), both edge rushers (Joey Bosa and Melvin Ingram) and No. 1 cornerback (Casey Hayward). Coach Anthony Lynn's team won six of its last seven games in 2017 and would have finished 12–4 had it not been for the gaffes of a disastrous special teams unit that cost them three wins. No one realizes this because the Chargers have been completely overshadowed by the Rams in the L.A. market and play at the 27,000-seat StubHub Center, by far the smallest venue in the league—and one they still can't fill. But there's no doubt the Chargers will be one of the most legitimate threats to New England in the AFC.

OUR PICK: CHARGERS FANS. It will be close since the Rams, who own most of the football hearts and minds in Southern California, are poised for another playoff run. Plus, your sister-in-law promised open bar and those little mini–hot dogs and barred the DJ from playing any Black Eyed Peas songs. There aren't going to be a lot of no-shows at that party, is my point. Still, if the Chargers start out fast, people will come out to see a winner.

TONY DEJAK/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP); AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

ADAM HUNGER/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

Hours of sleep lost by NFC East defensive coordinators while thinking about Saquon Barkley: Over/Under 51.5

A fact that might surprise you if you've been in a coma since 1989: The NFL is a pass-happy league. So perhaps you shrugged your shoulders when the Giants decided to rustle awake their hibernating run game by drafting the Penn State star in April (with the second overall pick, no less). Barkley *(above)* is capable of becoming the third consecutive rookie to win the NFL rushing title—even behind an offensive line with some question marks. But just as important: He's immediately going to be one of the most valuable pass-catching backs in the NFL—think Pittsburgh's Le'Veon Bell and Arizona's David Johnson—because he can torch most linebackers and even some safeties in one-on-one situations. Consider too that wideout Odell Beckham Jr. demands a double team on every play; second-year tight end Evan Engram provides another matchup headache; and new coach Pat Shurmur is considered one of the shrewdest play designers in the NFL. Eli Manning, whose arm strength is still there, is the kind of savvy veteran who can take full advantage of the matchup problems this offense creates. The Giants, 31st in the league in scoring a year ago, have a chance to be one of the league's top five scoring teams in 2018.

OUR PICK: OVER. Figure a defensive coordinator averages five hours of sleep per night, and loses an average of 90 minutes per night during Giants week, starting with the previous Sunday. Six division games, though the Eagles visit on a Thursday night and Washington hosts the Giants after the Skins play a Monday nighter. That would come in around 57 hours of lost sleep this season. Not even memory foam would make much of a dent in that.

TV pundit references to Patrick Mahomes as "Favre-ian": Over/Under 12.5 ***(Over. Mahomes is going to be something to behold in Andy Reid's offense.)***

Decibels of the unintelligible grunt from Bill Belichick the first time he hears "Garoppolo" during a press availability: Over/Under 38.5 ***(Under. Bill will be expecting it.)***

Metaphorical pounds of pressure on new Vikings QB Kirk Cousins's shoulders: Over/Under 4 billion ***(Over, considering how good Minnesota's defense is.)***

Photocopies of lost-dog-style Khalil Mack posters Jon Gruden pins to telephone poles around the greater Oakland area: Over/Under 712.5

Strange times in Oakland. The Raiders are two years from setting sail for Vegas. Wunderkind QB Derek Carr took a step back in 2017 after signing his mega-contract last summer. The man brought into fix him last coached a game during the George W. Bush presidency. It's been almost an afterthought that the Raiders' best player could miss regular-season games while holding out. Mack *(above)*, indisputably one of the top three pass rushers in football and the 2016 NFL Defensive Player of the Year, is one of the few non-QBs who deserves to be paid like a franchise headliner, but Carr's contract (heavily backloaded) complicates Oakland's ability to get a second huge deal on the books. A lame-duck franchise coming off a 10-loss season, a new regime, a QB in crisis and now a potentially prolonged absence for the franchise's only undisputed superstar. Welcome back, Gruden. **OUR PICK: UNDER.** Considering Gruden is on the record as being . . . shall we say, lukewarm, on some technology that is now commonplace in the NFL, he won't take any shortcuts with social media. Still, he's going to have his hands full with Carr and an offense that needs a lot of that famous Gruden TLC. He won't have much free time to woo back Mack. □

RYAN KANG/AP (MACK); SCOTT WINTERS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MAHOMES); ROBERT BECK (BELICHICK); JAMIE SCHWABEROW (COUSINS)

PLAY FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

Jerry Rice #80
Legendary Receiver

Brett Favre #4
Legendary Quarterback

COPPER FIT
Gear to Keep You in the Game

EVERY SEASON STARTS AT DICK'S SPORTING GOODS

COPPER fit

LIVE LIMITLESS

The Dolphins' new D-end has silently protested before every single game the past two years. NOW HE'S DOING HIS BEST TO EXPLAIN WHY

THE FIRST time Robert Quinn raised his fist during the national anthem, on Sept. 12, 2016, the Rams and the 49ers were moments away from kicking off their season opener. One hundred and thirty days remained in Barack Obama's presidency. Alton Sterling and Philando Castile had just been buried in Baton Rouge and St. Louis, respectively. Stephon Clark of Sacramento had a year and a half to live; Terence Crutcher of Tulsa had four days. The police officers who killed those four black men would eventually all be either acquitted at trial or not prosecuted at all.

Receiver Kenny Britt stood with Quinn on the Rams' sideline that night, each player raising a balled right hand toward the Santa Clara, Calif., sky, 10 miles from a statue on the San Jose State campus depicting Olympians John Carlos and Tommie Smith doing the same thing 48 years earlier. On the opposite side of the field, the 49ers' Eli Harold and Antoine Bethea also each raised a fist. Eric Reid and Colin Kaepernick knelt—this was two weeks after Kaepernick was first noticed kneeling, in a preseason game—as pop violinist Lindsey Stirling played a mournful rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Historians will say little about the Niners' winning that game 28–0. They will recall more readily the events of the two years *after* those first protests. For starters: Eight weeks later America elected as its President a man who would call these protesting players "sons of bitches" and rant that they should be fired.

ROBERT QUINN

BY MICHAEL MCKNIGHT | BY AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE MAN BE

BEHIND THE FIST

Police-involved killings, according to *The Washington Post*, rose from 963 in 2016 to 987 in '17 and are on pace to exceed 1,000 in '18. And, as Football Outsiders points out, Kaepernick became the first quarterback in NFL history to throw 200 passes as a 29-year-old (in '16) and then not appear on an NFL roster at 30.

The former Niners QB remains the face of this movement, but its steadiest presence is a man, born and raised in what was once the epicenter of the American slave trade, who expresses his dissent while standing. Since that first moment in 2016, Quinn has raised his fist during the anthem before every game his team has played, including the eight he sat out due to injury, which makes him one of the few constants in this turbulent stretch of protests.

In March, Quinn was traded to the Dolphins, who, it was revealed last month, considered fining or suspending any player who protests this season. On Aug. 9, in Miami, Quinn raised his fist before a preseason game against the Buccaneers, and he promises to *continue* raising his fist. "I won't stop until they get rid of me," he says. "That's going to be the only way to silence me."

None of it, of course, matters if his message doesn't come across. Sitting at a picnic table outside the Rams' practice facility last December, dressed in sweats and a beanie, Quinn lamented, "I don't know if people really know why I'm protesting." He stopped and reset himself. "Its meaning starts with—I'm gonna be honest—black power. *Let's protect our own*. But at the same time I want to unite America. I would like for everyone to quit finger-pointing. Let's all be one people."

Other than raising his fist, Quinn, who's bagged 57½ sacks since 2012, is not a confident expresser of himself, which he conceded during multiple interviews with lengthy pauses and comments like, "Let me think about how to put this." And, "Sometimes when I speak it comes off wrong." And, "Does that make sense?

"This is important to me," he said, looking down shyly at his scarred fingers, each the size of a premature baby's arm. "I want people to understand.

"People still think I'm disrespecting the flag. Not just me—everyone who protests. If you're not African-American, I don't expect you to relate to it. My ancestors were brought here [on slave] ships, treated like a fraction of a human, under a flag that was created out of wiping out Native Americans. Today that flag tells Muslims and Mexicans, 'We don't want you here.' We're supposed to be America—equal opportunity, equal people—but you look around, and it's not like that."

So he raises his fist during the anthem. It's his way of saying the red-white-and-blue spectacle preceding every NFL game hides an important lie he is not willing to tolerate, not even for two minutes. A raised fist, Quinn explains, is his answer to the question Francis Scott Key (a slave owner who once called blacks an "inferior race of people") posed at the end of the first verse of his song about the Battle of Baltimore, in 1814: *O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave/O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave?*

"No," Quinn says. "Not every American is free. Let's start back in the day. One of the first names that pops into my head is Emmett Till," who was 14 when he was lynched

CAROLINA ON MY MIND

Ladson gave Quinn a unique perspective on the black experience—one he carried to St. Louis, L.A. and, now, Miami.

JEFFERY A. SALTER

in Mississippi, in 1955. "More recently, Trayvon Martin," who was 17 when he was gunned down by a Florida neighborhood-watch coordinator, in 2012. "Is there any real difference between the two? Were they free?"

Seventeen months before Quinn first raised his right fist, a 50-year-old black man named Walter Scott was pulled over for a busted taillight near Quinn's hometown of Ladson, S.C. Unarmed, Scott fled on foot. A white policeman named Michael Slager fired eight shots at Scott's back, including one that tore through his heart and lungs, killing him. (Slager was later sentenced to 20 years in prison for second-degree murder.)

Ladson, a town of 14,000, lies 19 miles from the Charleston harbor where an estimated 40% of enslaved Africans first set foot in America. Two hundred years ago the main cash crop here was rice, a stubborn, thirsty product that required several times the manpower of cotton—which is why, at the time of the Civil War, 14 men in South Carolina owned at least 500 slaves apiece. Most of them lived in the Lowcountry, where 130 years later the first dots took shape on a time line that would inform and encourage the protests Robert Quinn engages in today.

"I was walking with two of my cousins—we must have been 12, 13—near my grandma's house in Monck's Corner [named for Charles Monck, a local slave owner who branded his human property]," says Quinn. "It was a long, empty dirt road, and a cop just randomly pulls over and says, 'You look like suspects.' The first time I was profiled by police, I wasn't even old enough to drive."

Steve LaPrad, who coached Quinn for four years at Fort Dorchester High, had never heard that story. He says that when he first saw Quinn raise his fist he felt "surprise." "Not that it was right or wrong—just *surprise*. He'd never done anything like that." LaPrad, who is white, repeats what several locals, including Quinn's own parents, remember: They never knew racism "was a big deal for Robert at school."

Tammy Cobbs raised her kids just down the road from the Quinns. She describes her family as "white, Christian, conservative, home-schooled. We're probably what people would consider the opposite end—the people Robert's protesting *against*." And yet: Her sons Brandon and Devin used to play with the Quinn kids "from sunup till sundown. My boys always knew that if they wanted an overnighter [with the Quinns], it was a yes. We couldn't have asked for better childhood friends for our sons."

Regarding Quinn's protests, Cobbs says, "I was a little surprised." She never realized racism had affected him so personally, she adds. "But that doesn't mean you can't have compassion or empathy for somebody else."

Says coach LaPrad, "I'm sure me and him don't see things exactly the same right now, but that guy—the world would be a better place if there were more Robert Quinns. I don't think he has an enemy in this whole Charleston area. So however you feel about what he does [during the anthem], if you know Robert Quinn you just say, 'It's Robert, so he's got a good reason.' "

> **"I don't know if people really know why I'm protesting," says Quinn. "This is important to me. I want people to understand."**

IN SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico, 49 years before Robert Quinn first raised his right fist, a janitor-musician named Mariano Camacho Sr. messed around on his wife and got another woman pregnant. Mercedes Camacho was washing dishes when her husband came home and informed her he'd fathered an illegitimate daughter. "It drove a stake in my mom's heart," recalls their now-62-year-old son, Mariano Jr., who was 12 at the time.

Mariano Sr. didn't want the baby. Nor did the child's birth mother. So he put the girl in foster care in Puerto Rico and moved with his wounded wife and two sons to New Jersey. When that girl, María, turned nine, Mariano Sr. begrudgingly brought her to the U.S., where Mercedes, still hurting, "raised María like one of her own," says Mariano Jr., who gets choked up at this part.

María Camacho would go on to earn a track scholarship to Baptist College in Charleston, where she met a hurdler named James Quinn. They married young and in the early 1990s bought a three-bedroom house in Ladson for $64,000. James worked for UPS, María at Burger King, and Robert, the second oldest of their four children, manned the drive-through alongside Mom as soon as the law allowed. The Quinns weren't poor, but they were no strangers to eating Burger King for dinner, either. "Paintballs were expensive," says Brandon Cobbs, "so Robert and I would go in the woods and shoot each other with BB guns to save money."

Quinn's girlfriend throughout high school, Damara Miller, recalls that Robert "didn't talk much. He never used foul language, except maybe on the field. And I didn't have to worry about other girls. He was a gentleman."

No one cared that Damara was white and Robert was black, says Miller. "He wanted to be a pro skateboarder. He listened to [white Nashville rock band] Evanescence. You couldn't stereotype Robert. He hung out with everybody.

"Personally, I'm not sure whether I would protest during the anthem," she adds, "but if he chooses to, I support it 100%. Everyone around here knows his heart."

María Quinn—Puerto Rican orphan turned American success story—was as surprised by her son's pregame

gesture as anyone. “At first I was like, ‘What the heck is he doing?’ ” she says. “I asked, ‘Rob, why are you doing this?’ He said, ‘Mom, it’s my beliefs. It’s what I want to do.’ He did say that he wouldn’t *kneel*, though.”

Quinn’s uncle Mariano Jr. believes that delineation has to do with the 20-year Army career he himself embarked on after his own father moved the Camachos to the U.S. in the late 1960s. Before NFL games Quinn stands against, among other things, the current administration’s immigration policies—policies Mariano happens to support. “What Robert does, that’s up to him,” says Camacho. “He’s a grown man. I respect what he believes in. But not all of our beliefs are the same.”

His feelings on immigration aside, Uncle Mariano says he is fully on board with the mantra his little sister taught Robert and his siblings when they were toddlers: “Help people when you can.”

TWELVE YEARS before Quinn first raised his right fist, back when he was a Fort Dorchester freshman, a friend of his mother’s needed help. Tammy Gordon had a son, D.J., who suffered from sickle-cell anemia. The child’s medications affected his weight, and at age six D.J. was already 100 pounds. “Teenagers don’t wanna deal with little kids, especially if they look a little different,” says Tori Swain, who managed the Burger King where María and Robert worked. “But Robert was glad to hold D.J.’s hand and be out in public with him.”

The young boy later tagged along with Robert and Damara to a school dance; they mingled as a trio and had their formal photo taken together. “D.J. became that little guy everybody saw walking behind Robert,” says Gordon.

Today, D.J. is in high school. “They still talk on the phone all the time,” says Gordon, “texting back and forth about homework, football, everything.”

Shortly after that friendship began, Robert faced a medical challenge of his own. In the fall of 2007, in training camp before Quinn’s senior season at Fort Dorchester, LaPrad and his staff noticed their star defensive end was playing less aggressively than normal. The coach chalked it up to an improved O-line, but a couple of weeks into the season he knew something was wrong. Why was a prospect who’d just been visited by Alabama’s Nick Saban suddenly letting running backs run right by him?

The only person Quinn had told about his headaches was his mom, who’d already noticed that his eyes were taking on a yellow cast and that he was struggling to remember things. The day after Fort Dorchester lost to their arch rivals, Summerville High, in 2007, Quinn was scheduled for the morning shift at Burger King. Before dawn, his parents heard a *Thump!* from upstairs. Then another. Robert had passed out, risen, and passed out again. His parents found him unconscious in the bathroom.

BIG GIVER
Quinn doled out Christmas gifts with Austin in 2016 and turkeys with teammates (right) in ’12.

Quinn was rushed to University of South Carolina Children’s Hospital, where doctors cut open the back of his skull and discovered a dime-sized tumor on his brain. They took a biopsy and inserted a tube to relieve the pressure.

Suzette Shaw, Quinn’s economics teacher back then, arrived at his recovery room expecting the worst. Instead, she found herself laughing. “It was a children’s hospital, so his bed was half his size, and there were cartoon characters all over the walls.” Then she noticed all the tubes and monitors. “He kept telling me, ‘It’s O.K., Miss Shaw,’ ” she recalls, moved to tears by the memory of this frightened man-child’s willing himself to smile. “ ‘It’s gonna be fine, Ms. Shaw. Don’t cry.’ ”

Quinn’s biopsy eventually came back negative for cancer, but doctors told him he was done with contact sports. The people of Ladson reacted as if he’d died. On senior night, teammates wore decals of his initials on their helmets. The 35-yard line was painted red, honoring his jersey number. “That was a really hard time,” says Miller, tears returning 10 years later. “I remember his mom looking him in the eye and saying, ‘The devil is a liar.’ That was all he needed.”

Four months after having his tumor scraped, Quinn drove the family’s dented Explorer to the state wrestling tournament, where he defeated the defending private-

RIC TAPIA/RAMS

school champ to win a third straight heavyweight title.

"[The brain tumor] really made me realize that tomorrow is not promised," says Quinn. "Every day, I'm just happy to wake up with a smile. It humbled me, but it also made me want to do more for others, because my life was almost taken from me. *Does that make sense?*"

SEVEN YEARS before Robert Quinn first raised his right fist, a high school running back named Lavelle Sloan was pulled off the field in Fayetteville, N.C., and into a cancer ward because doctors had found a tumor on his brain too.

Sloan was watching college football from his bed at Duke Hospital later that fall when he heard about a North Carolina D-end who'd blown off medical advice and returned to the game following his own brain tumor. A social worker contacted Andre Williams, an assistant at UNC; Williams approached Quinn, a 19-year-old sophomore, and "Robert immediately understood," says Williams. "It was very important to Robert to offer any help he could."

The Tar Heels hosted Sloan at a game, and Quinn met with the boy on the field before kickoff. Later, he paid Sloan a surprise visit in his hospital room, where they were left alone to talk while relatives wept tears of gratitude in the hall. "We talked football; we talked about life," Quinn told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* the following spring, slightly miffed that the paper in his new NFL city had found out about the budding friendship. "My doctor told me I was supposed to be brain dead, so I'm living testimony that [a recovery] can happen. I wanted to give him hope. That's all you have to cling to." Sloan fought for four more months, then passed away on April 14, 2010. Among the memories left behind is a framed photo, still hanging on Marilyn Sloan's living room wall, of Robert Quinn and her son.

That relationship unfurled behind the scenes, the setting Quinn prefers for such outreach. When he first took a public stance on NFL sidelines two years ago, "in a way that other people would notice," says Swain, "that's when I knew it was a big deal for him. He has never been one to call attention to himself, and he has always done the right thing by other people." She pauses. "But he hasn't always made the best decisions for himself."

Following UNC's spring game in 2010, Quinn accepted an agent's gift of an all-expenses-paid trip to Miami, where a jeweler gave him two black diamond watches and a pair of matching earrings—about $5,500 in improper benefits. When the NCAA found out, Quinn and two other players were declared ineligible for the season.

Quinn issued a statement, apologizing to his teammates and coaches "for bringing this burden upon them," but he also lied to NCAA investigators during his initial interviews. He was booted from the team and three years later, during his third NFL season, received a letter of "permanent disassociation" that prohibited him from contacting UNC student-athletes, from entering the Kenan Football Center and from "further embarrassing" UNC and "jeopardizing [its] commitment to full NCAA rules compliance." Carolina's "integrity . . . has been damaged through your actions," the letter continued.

But if you pick up the Tar Heels' 2018 media guide, which is equal parts recruiting pitch and p.r. instrument, you'll still see Quinn listed as the recipient of the '08 Brian Piccolo Award, given to the ACC's "most courageous" player; as a member of UNC's '11 NFL draft class; and as one of the program's 24 all-time first-round picks.

> ***"What Robert does, that's up to him," says Camacho, a 20-year Army vet. "If that's what he believes in, then I respect what he believes in."***

The disassociation knife only cuts one way, apparently. "I just find these things *interesting*," says Quinn, who enjoys talking about the Carolina controversy as much as he likes discussing his impact on D.J. Gordon and Lavelle Sloan. Which is to say: not at all. But he cannot stop the stories that flow forth from the people he has touched, George Bailey–like, over his 28 years.

"He was injured when we won the state championship two years ago," says LaPrad, Quinn's coach at Fort Dorchester. "He and [his wife] Christina flew in for the game, and afterward he handed me a $50,000 check to buy the kids rings. I didn't ask him for that." The rings ended up costing quite a bit less than 50 grand, LaPrad adds, and "we've done a lot of good at the school with that money."

A few weeks later, around Christmas, Rebecca Carter, a single mother in L.A., was preparing to move into a government-subsidized apartment with her six kids—a refuge, finally, after years of homelessness and suffering domestic abuse. She expected the unit to be empty. Instead she found it fully furnished, filled with school supplies and groceries, with a Christmas tree and presents, all courtesy of Quinn and a teammate, Tavon Austin. Those two extended the same kindness last December to a mother of six, Shwonna Cox, who'd been displaced from two apartments in two weeks by wildfires that affected L.A.

There are myriad examples of Quinn's preference for

JEFF CURRY

discreet, direct impact over the broader political reforms sought by players like Chris Long, Quinn's friend and former Rams teammate. To that point, Tammy Gordon shares a story from the 2017 offseason. Robert had returned to Ladson for a free youth camp that he and Fort Dorchester teammate Carlos Dunlap (now with the Bengals) host every summer. That Sunday in church, she says, "D.J. came running up to me, saying, 'Mama! Robert just texted, and he said if we pack a bag right now, I can come to California with him!' " By the time they got home and put a bag together, Quinn was at their door, boarding passes in hand. D.J. stayed in L.A. with the Quinns for six weeks.

D.J. wants to play football, but his medical condition has made that dream impossible. "Robert always tells him there's more to life than football," says Gordon's mom. "And D.J. wants to be a chef. He likes to cook." So last summer, in California, Quinn invited a culinary instructor to his home to show D.J. a few things in the kitchen.

"I don't want to get political," says Gordon. But she does want to make it clear that Quinn isn't protesting "because he hates America. He's doing it because he has a big heart."

IN THE SHADOWS

Kaepernick may be the face of activism today, but Quinn, who's raised his fist even when injured and not playing, is the movement's model of consistency.

ERIC REID said earlier this year that he'd stop kneeling if he regains an NFL roster spot. Another contingent of players, led by the Eagles' Malcolm Jenkins, decided to stop protesting last November after the league pledged $89 million to various social justice platforms (although Jenkins raised his fist before the Eagles' first preseason game and remained in the tunnel during the anthem for the second). Quinn says he hasn't discussed the protests with these men, but he hopes other players aren't "afraid of making their stance because they don't want to stop making a dollar."

He can already hear the response from fans—*Easy for you to say, millionaire*—and this is where the guy who played paintball with BB guns and rode his bike to work at Burger King digs in. "Let's erase money," he says. "How would we function? You're growing apples, I'm growing oranges, that person over there is growing lettuce. Now we have to take care of each other. Versus: I'm your boss. Listen to me. I pay you two bucks and you make me 50.' "

It's a radical vision, but it's consistent with Quinn's belief that some of America's dearest institutions need overhauling. Racism and the quest for personal gain, he says, have become too entwined with this country's roots. And in the NFL's too—from the league's spotty history regarding player safety to its clumsy responses to player protests to its lopsided hiring practices. In April, Quinn fired off a text message that evoked the days of Thomas Monck, pointing out that the NFL has "zero black owners" and only a small minority of black coaches (including assistants), while black players make up about 70% of the league's rosters.

For years, Quinn has heard the establishment tell minorities, *We know, just hang in there*. But for how much longer? his raised fist asks. How long can we ignore that the American experiment—freedom for all—is either a hoax or it requires far more effort than is currently being expended?

This is why Quinn prefers grassroots work. This is why he and Rams tackle Andrew Whitworth quietly donated dozens of tickets to kids in a Pop Warner program in Watts last year. It's why he said yes when Rams punter Johnny Hekker asked if he could stand next to Quinn during all those anthems, with his pale hand on Quinn's shoulder, "to let white people out there know that it's O.K. to speak up," Hekker explains.

Quinn's in Miami now. But his fist will stay up, as surely as he will continue getting biannual checkups on the brain tumor still inside his head. As surely as he keeps listening to "Blessings," by LeCrae and Ty Dolla $ign every morning. *If I ever took a loss I learned a lesson/I won't ever think I'm better than the next man/If you woke up this morning, it's a blessing.*

"There are disadvantages that come with having brown skin in this country," says Hekker. "Being a white man, it can be difficult to see these things, but they're undeniable. The people who are affected—Rob just wants to lift those people up."

That's the detail María Camacho Quinn says most people misunderstand about her son's pregame pose: "It's not about Robert Quinn at all." It's about the people he's lifting, sometimes by the scruff of the neck, saving them, if only temporarily, from their oppressive day-to-day reality—an image that looks for all the world like a man raising his fist. □

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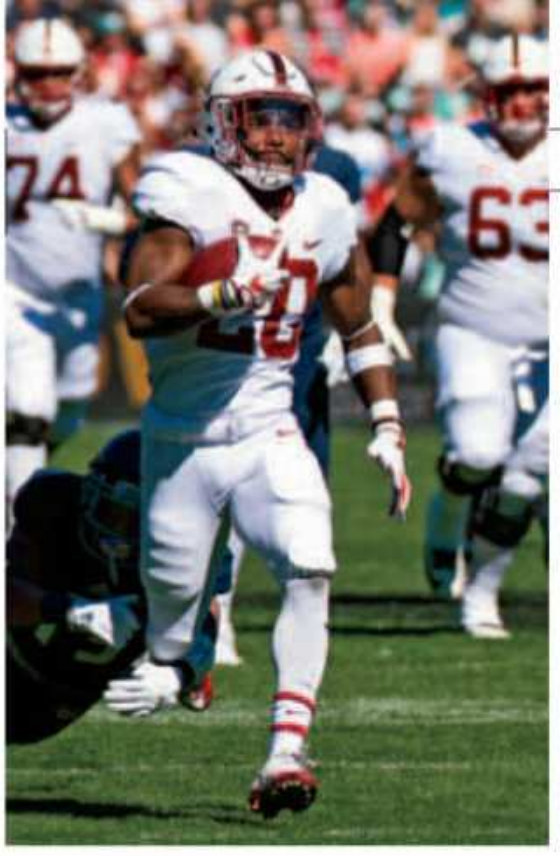

POINT AFTER

SUNDAYS CAN WAIT

WHY I TURNED DOWN THE NFL FOR ONE MORE SEASON OF COLLEGE BALL

BY BRYCE LOVE

I **'VE LOVED** football since I was five, when I first tied flags around my waist and sprinted up and down the fields in North Carolina. As far back as I can remember, I was flying around the house with a football, jumping onto the couch the way Walter Payton leaped into the end zone, extending my arm and flicking my wrist like LaDainian Tomlinson's stiff arm, studying Barry Sanders to understand how he did what he did. My pops played the old NFL Films so often that it felt like Steve Sabol's baritone voice was narrating my own childhood. My dream, ever since I can remember, has been to play on Sundays.

So it must have confused people last winter when I decided to forgo the NFL draft and return to Stanford for my senior year. It was a difficult choice. Football is my happiness, my drive, but I discovered something else as I drilled down on what I should do: More than the game, I love the bonds that I've formed with my teammates, my brothers—it's what makes football so pure.

On the field, it thrills me to know that our opponent has spent an entire week trying to figure out how to stop us. There's no better feeling than looking from side to side before the snap and knowing that we are all working together as a unit toward a common goal. I'm willing to sacrifice anything to contribute to this team's success, and I couldn't leave without trying one more time to achieve everything that my teammates and I have dreamed of: getting to another Rose Bowl, winning the Pac-12 North and the conference championship.

We have unfinished business here, but if I'm being honest, there's more to it. I'm only 21, but I'm taking a longer view. Sports eventually come to an end for everyone, and this reality informed my decision to stay and finish my degree in human biology. As much as I desperately wish to play in the NFL, I am also passionate about becoming a pediatrician—something else I've dreamed of ever since my doctor cured me of pneumonia when I was little. I believe that pushing myself to never settle in any aspect of my life can show others, particularly in the black community, that they can uncompromisingly reach for all their goals.

> "THE PEOPLE I TRUST ALL TOLD ME THE SAME THING: THAT I CAN'T MAKE A WRONG DECISION IF I FOLLOW MY HEART."

It can be hard to balance priorities. I received flak this summer for missing Pac-12 media day because I had class. (I Skyped in instead.) But the work I put in now will help me navigate my future. That's why I took lecture notes and ice baths this summer, writing essays and dragging 90-pound sleds.

I understand the risks I'm taking this fall. Will I be as attractive to pro teams if I'm injured? What if I don't have the same kind of season that I had last year, when I set an FBS record with 8.1 yards per carry and was projected to be a top 30 pick? I took some precautionary measures, like getting insurance for worst-case injury scenarios, but there's no way any of us can predict the future.

I'm confident in my decision because it's not something I came to alone. I trusted the people around me and the process that I always use. I spoke with my coaches, with my parents, with my brother, Chris, and with former teammates Christian McCaffrey and Solomon Thomas, who both went pro before finishing college. I also spoke with Andrew Luck, who finished college before going pro. No one pushed me in any direction, but they all said the same thing: that I can't make a wrong decision as long as I follow my heart.

Did I make the right choice? I believe so, but you can all see when our season kicks off against San Diego State on Aug. 31. □

STEVEN MARKHAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP

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